

# **The Qinghai-Tibet Railway and Tibet Tourism: Travelers' Perspectives**

by

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## **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## **Acknowledgements**

Here I would like to express my sincere thanks to many people who have offered their support, encouragement and assistance throughout the whole process of my field research and my thesis writing. Without their contributions, the thesis would not be possible.

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## **Abstract**

With the distinguished natural and cultural tourism resources, Tibet is undoubtedly a desirable travel destination both domestically and internationally. With the newly opened Qinghai-Tibet railway to Lhasa in July 2006, Tibet tourism development was boosted markedly due to the increased accessibility and affordability.

This study evaluates the impacts of the increased accessibility achieved through the Qinghai-Tibet railway on tourist travel decisions for, and experiences in, Tibet from travelers' perspectives. The relative importance of the train journey in comparison with the destination experience at Tibet is also examined. A destination choice framework is proposed based on a review of previous literature. It is applied in this study to understand tourists' travel destination choice of Tibet. A questionnaire survey was designed as the major primary data collection method to collect travelers' perceptions on the train journey and Tibet tourism. Conducted on the train to and from Lhasa of Tibet, a total of 187 questionnaires were collected, including 82 for the pre-visit sample and 105 for the post-visit sample.

Important destination choice factors for Tibet are identified in this study. The findings also support the importance of the railway on tourists' destination choice of Tibet and in the overall travel experience of Tibet. Expectations and satisfactions with the destination are also compared to indicate possibilities for further destination development in Tibet. This study improves the understanding of both the supply and demand sides of the tourism industry in Tibet. Both practical implications and academic implications are presented based on the major findings of this study. Contributions of this study and future research opportunities are discussed.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

Famous for its unique natural environment and cultural characteristics, Tibet has always been a desirable travel destination for people in China and all over the world. However, tourism development in Tibet was hindered by its inaccessibility due to the remote geographical location and limited transportation means available.

In July 2006 in China, a new railway line to Lhasa of Tibet opened, which has boosted Tibet tourism development markedly. A significant increase in tourism demand for Tibet has occurred with a large number of tourists coming to the region since the opening of the railway line. This has resulted in many issues concerning tourism development, environmental protection, regional economic development and the preservation of culture in Tibet. Tourism development in Tibet has been a widely discussed topic, as there is a huge gap between tourism demand and the supply-side capabilities in terms of facilities, service quality, tourism planning, and management experience and capability.

My research investigates the Qinghai-Tibet railway and Tibet tourism from the travelers' perspectives by identifying important motivation factors influencing the choice of Tibet as a travel destination, evaluating how the increase in accessibility by the opening of the railway line has influenced tourists' travel decisions and experiences, and the relative importance of the train journey itself in comparison with the destination experience in Tibet. The findings could help to improve the understanding of both the supply and demand sides of the tourism industry in Tibet, which could provide practical implications for future tourism planning, marketing and management. Moreover, a destination choice framework is proposed and applied in this study, which helps to understand tourists' travel destination selection process.

### **1.1 Purpose of Research**

This study intends to identify and evaluate the impacts of the increased accessibility achieved through the Qinghai-Tibet railway on tourist travel decisions for and

experiences in Tibet, and the relative importance of the train journey in comparison with the destination experience at Tibet. This will help us gain an understanding of the position of transport in tourism in the case of Tibet and the relationship between transport and tourism in general.

## 1.2 Research Questions

The research questions I intend to explore in my research are:

1. What are the major factors influencing tourists' destination choice of Tibet? How and to what extent do those factors influence tourists' destination choice of Tibet?
2. How and to what extent has the opening of the railway line to Lhasa influenced tourists' destination choice of Tibet?
3. What is the relative importance of the train journey in comparison with the destination experience in Tibet?
4. What are the expectations and satisfactions of train travelers to Tibet?
5. What are the practical implications of this study for improving the train journey and the destination experience, as well as the marketing of Tibet as a tourism destination?

## 1.3 Thesis Structure

Chapter one briefly states the problems to be addressed in the study, the research purpose and the specific research questions to be answered in the study. Chapter two reviews previous studies on China's domestic tourism development, tourism in Tibet, tourism and transport, scenic train travel, destination choice, factors influencing destination choice and the gaps in the literature to be addressed in this study. Chapter three provides an outline of the research methodology used in the study and explains the rationale for selecting self-administered questionnaire surveys delivered by the researcher, the researcher's observations and the use of secondary data in the study. In addition, the reason for selecting passengers on the train between Beijing and Lhasa of Tibet as the sample group and the sample selection method and sample size are also explained in detail. Chapter four presents the findings based on the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data collected during the field research. Major findings are presented in the following sections: respondents' profile, travel behaviour pattern, motivations for travel

to Tibet, expectations and satisfactions with the destination, perceptions of the train journey and their suggestions for enhancing the train journey and the destination experience in Tibet. Chapter five discusses both the practical implications for Tibet tourism development and the academic implications of this study. In Chapter six, the purpose of the study is reiterated, contributions of this study are discussed and future research opportunities are proposed.

## **2. Literature Review**

In this section, the background to, and current situation of, China's domestic tourism and tourism in Tibet are summarized based on previous studies. Previous literature on transport and tourism, and the scenic train travel are reviewed. Then the theories and findings of previous studies related to tourist destination choice are reviewed. Major factors influencing tourist destination choice are identified and their influences are discussed based on the literature. Furthermore, a destination choice framework is generalized. Finally, gaps in the previous literature are identified.

### **2.1 Tourism in China and Tibet**

#### **2.1.1 China's Domestic Tourism**

With the rapid economic development, China has become one of the top tourist destinations in the world. Unlike international tourism that has been emphasized and promoted since 1978 in association with the "Open Door" policy, domestic tourism in China experienced restriction and hesitation in development from the central government because of the concern that it would establish competition in tourism resources between domestic and international tourism. Only since 1992, has an active attitude toward domestic tourism development been adopted by the central government (Wen, 1998; Zhang, 1997).

Rapidly developed since late 1990s, domestic tourism in China has outpaced international tourism and become the major source of income in the tourism sector in China. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, in 2005 the annual domestic tourist number was 12 billion, with a 10 percent increase over 2004; RMB 5,286 billion revenue was generated from domestic tourism with a 12.2 percent increase over 2004, which is 68.8 percent of the total revenue from both domestic and international tourism (NBS, [www.stats.gov.cn](http://www.stats.gov.cn)). Growth of income per capita, increase of leisure time and the structural adjustment of China's national economy are the major reasons for the rapid increase in domestic travel in China (Wang & Qu, 2004).

Another stimulus of China's domestic tourism was the introduction of Golden Week holidays in 1999. By providing more free time for Chinese people, the Golden Week holiday system not only increases individual spending but also boosts domestic travel demand in China. With the intensity of tourism activities, Golden Week has stimulated the national economy in various aspects, including boosting the development of tourism industry; dramatically increasing tourist expenditure; and generating income for both tourism and non-tourism sectors. The past 17 Golden Week (till May 2006) achieved a total tourist number of 10.7 billion and total revenue of RMB 4,292 billion. For example, during the National Day Holiday in October 2005, the domestic tourist number reached 1.1 billion and the revenue generated was 463 billion, which contributes 9 percent of the annual domestic tourist number and the annual revenue for domestic tourism of 2005 (CNTA, [www.cnta.gov.cn](http://www.cnta.gov.cn)).

When looking at the characteristics of domestic travel in China, Zhang generalized that China's domestic tourism has a low starting point; a great market potential and a strong state macro control with central government policies have strong influences on the direction and strength of tourism development, at both local and national scale (Zhang, 1997). China's tourism authorities are involved in policy making, destination planning, construction and promotion, management of travel services and many other aspects of tourism development (Wang & Qu, 2004). With just about 20 years' contemporary history, domestic tourism in China has developed from virtually zero to become an important element in the national economy. Moreover the rapid national economic growth and the huge population base promise its further expansion.

Indeed, domestic tourism should not be viewed separately from China's macro economy. Due to the disparity of economic development in China, domestic tourism experiences the same disparity between coastal and inland regions, rural and urban areas. Economic wealth is highly concentrated in the coastal region and urban areas, where most domestic tourists are coming from and destinations are better developed and promoted (Wen, 1998); thus coastal regions benefit much more from domestic tourism, which increases regional economic disparity.

Zhang (1997) argued that besides economic growth enabling tourism development, cultural tradition is also an important influencing factor. As indicated in an old Chinese saying, “He who travels far knows much”, “enlarging one’s knowledge, raising one’s understanding of the world and society, enhancing self-cultivation, making friends and conducting cultural exchanges” are emphasized by the Chinese tourism tradition (Zhang, 1997). This traditional concept forms the “psychological basis for the strong desire of the Chinese people to travel (Zhang, 1997). However, constrained by their financial limitations, Chinese tourists maintain an economical and practical tourism consumption level without sacrificing the rich experiences and psychological rewards gained from travel (Zhang, 1997).

#### 2.1.2 Tourism in Tibet

Located in the world’s highest plateau, the Tibet Plateau, Tibet has rich natural and cultural resources. The diversified geographical features unique to high altitude regions, and the Tibetan Buddhism and ethnic culture are all considered strong tourism attractions to people in China and all over the World (Xiao, Hou & Li, 2003). However, in the context of the rapid development of domestic tourism in China, Tibet tourism was experiencing slow development for the past two decades with total tourism revenue from 1980 to 1998 of only 15.8 billion RMB (Zhang, 2002).

It is widely accepted that the major barrier for tourism development in Tibet is accessibility. Before the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, passenger transportation to Tibet relied mainly on air transportation, which has very limited capacity and high cost, restricting market demand for Tibet tourism. Therefore, transportation restriction is the bottleneck preventing economic development in Tibet, including tourism (Xiao, Hou & Li, 2003; Zhang, 2002). By providing effective alternative transportation which dramatically increases the accessibility of Tibet, the Qinghai-Tibet railway will enormously promote tourism development in areas along the railway line, especially for Tibet (Zhang, 2002). Zhang Qingli, secretary of the CPC Tibet regional committee, pointed out that after the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, tourism revenue for 2006 reached RMB 2,770 million with 42.3 percent increase over 2005, and the number of

travelers to Tibet increased 39.5 percent to 2.51million (Tibet tour, 2007.7.27). In addition, from January to June in 2007, Lhasa received 796,925 travelers, which is a 77.7 percent growth over the same period in 2006 without the train service, and the revenue generated was increased by 75 percent to RMB 833 million (Tibet tour, 2007.7.27).

Furthermore, air transportation to Tibet was actually increased after the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in July 2006; therefore a win-win situation for both train and air transportation to Tibet is achieved. According to Xinhua news (2007.7.17), more airlines are opening or increasing their flight services connecting Tibet after the opening of the railway. Therefore, in the first half of 2007, the total number of travelers via Lhasa airport reached 464 thousand, which is a 17.1 percent increase over the same period of 2006; and number of flights to and from Lhasa airport was increased by 19 percent to 4,300 flights. The total number of travelers to Tibet by train reached 1.5 million during the first year of the Qinghai-Tibet train service, which constitutes slightly over 50 percent of all travelers to Tibet (Xinhua, 2007.7.17).

Recent development ensures the continuous improvements of the accommodation capacity in Tibet. According to the starred hotel report released on 15 June 2007 on the website of Tibet Tour, which is the official website of Tibet Tourism Board, there are 75 starred hotels with the capability of receiving international tourists, including 1 four star, 1 pre-four star and 28 3 stars and 6 pre-3 star hotels in Tibet Autonomous region with a total capacity of 11,602 beds (CNTA, 2007.6.15). Besides that there are around 1,250 non-star hotels or hostels, making the total number of beds available in Tibet approximately 48,000 (Xinhua, 2007.4.5), which is sufficient to meet the accommodation requirements in Tibet.

As reported by Xinhua News, after the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, which increased the accessibility of Tibet, major restrictions of Tibet tourism were identified as the difficulty of getting the train tickets and the entrance tickets for the Potala Palace (Figure 2.2.1), especially during travel peak seasons; and the pressure on tourism

operation and management dealing with the huge increase in travelers in Tibet, in terms of the quality service, market regulation and tourism safety issues (Xinhua, 2007.4.5).

Figure 2.2.1: The Potala Place in Lhasa



(Source: Photo taken by the researcher)

The restricted capacity of the must-see tourism site of the Potala Palace (Figure 2.2.1) has been a bottleneck for Tibet tourism development. The Potala Palace was first built in year 637 and the construction of the present palace began in 1645. Built with wood and earth on the side of Marpo Ri hill, the Potala Palace has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1994. Preservation of this world cultural heritage restricted the level of tourism usage. Currently, the daily receiving capacity of the Potala Palace is adjusted from the original 1,500 to 2,300 tourists by assigning tourists to different time slots during the day. There are 1,600 group tickets and 700 individual tickets; however it is still not enough to meet demand. As pointed by Zhang Qingli, secretary of the CPC Tibet regional committee,



development and promotion of other nearby tourism attractions, such as Jokhang Temple and Norbulingka, the former summer palace of the Dalai Lama, should be emphasized in order to divert tourist flow from the Potala Place and prolong tourists' stay in Lhasa, so that they have more flexibility to arrange their visit to the Potala Place (Xinhua, 2007.4.5)

As stated by Niu (2002), besides accessibility, accommodation and the limited capacity of major tourism sites discussed above, there are other important factors restricting tourism development in Tibet, such as limited market, not well-developed infrastructure, environmental disruption and social and cultural conflicts. Thus tourism development in Tibet lags behind other regions in China. Possessing the richest but less developed tourism resources in China, low level of human development and the unique history and culture formed within its distinctive natural and isolated social environment, Niu (2002) argued that Tibet tourism has great potential for further development. In addition, tourism development would also play a critical role in the regional economic development of Tibet, as tourism is more adaptable to the isolated environment. Moreover, the distinctive social and natural environment in Tibet, which hinders the development of other industries, is considered as the attraction of a tourism destination. Therefore, tourism would be the break-through point for the economic development of Tibet, as tourism could bring people, information and technology into this region, which would help bridge the development gap between Tibet and other parts of China and help the development of other economic sectors in this region.

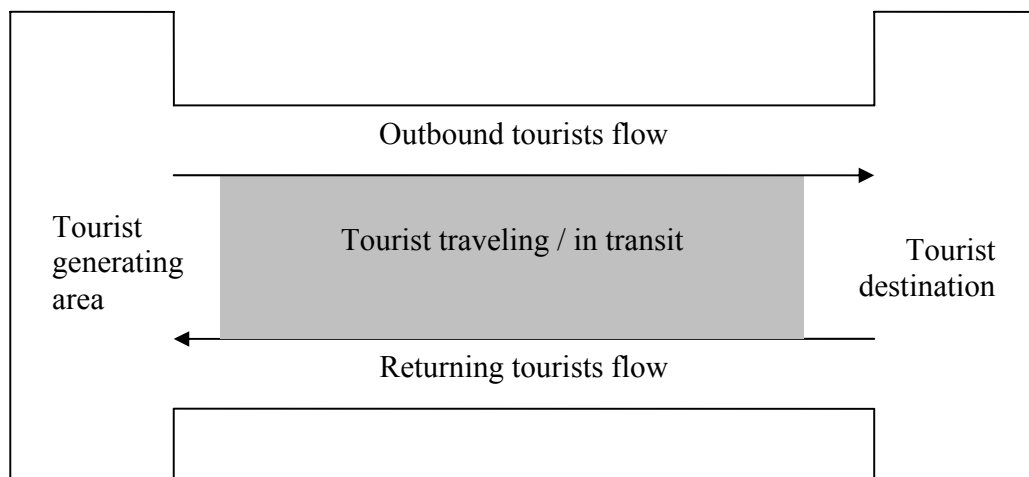
## 2.2 Tourism and Transport

Transport is an inseparable part of tourism, forming an important part of the total travel experience. One distinctive character of tourism products is that tourists need to travel to the destination area to enjoy it. Therefore transport is inevitably involved in tourism by providing the essential link between tourism origin and destination areas and facilitating the movements of travelers with diversified purposes (Page, 2005). Moreover, as stated by Page (2005), the mode of transport forms context and a controlled environment for tourists' movement between destinations and attractions. Lamb and Davidson (1996) also argued that, as an important aspect of the tourist experience, the quality of the

transportation experience is a key criterion in destination choice. Therefore, it is important to understand the key relationships, inter-connections and interactions between tourism and transport.

According to Leiper (1990), a tourism system is composed of a tourist, a traveler-generating region, tourism destination region, transit routes for tourists traveling between generating and destination areas; and the travel and tourism industry, which is illustrated by Page (2005) in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.2: A Tourism System



(Source: Redrawn from Page, 2005)

Collier (1994) proposed three needs to be fulfilled by tourist transport, as transporting tourists from the generating to the host area, between destinations and within destinations. Hall (1999) further improved the concept by categorizing roles of tourist transport into four areas as linking the source market with the host destination, providing mobility and access within the destination, providing mobility and access within an actual tourist attraction, and facilitating travel along a recreational route.

However, transport is usually shared by both hosts and tourists to varying extents. Thus, it is generally hard to distinguish between tourist and non-tourist use of different forms of

transport, excepting dedicated forms of tourist transport such as charter flights and cruises (Page, 2005).

The integral relationship that exists between transport and tourism is demonstrated by Lamb and Davidson (1996: pp 264) as: Transport is one of the three foundational components of tourism, the other two are the tourism product (or supply) and the tourism market (or demand). Without transportation, most forms of tourism could not exist. In some cases, the transportation experience is the tourism experience (e.g. cruises, scenic and heritage rail trips, and motorcoach and bicycle tours).

In order to understand the transport-tourism relationship, Page (2005) proposed two interconnected approaches as transport for tourism and transport as tourism. Transport for tourism considers transport as a utility. In this approach, the mode of transport has no direct intrinsic value in itself as a tourism experience and the level of satisfaction is related to cost and speed of travel. The other approach, transport as tourism, considers transport as the main benefit of the tourism experience with high intrinsic value, or at least many of the attributes associated with the mode of transport are beneficial.

Hobson and Uysal (1992:09) argued that major steps in the development of tourism have been linked with advancements in transport. Technological innovations of international transport actually caused distance shrinkage as stated by Tolley and Turton (1995), which is manifested in tourism as well. However, the development of tourism and transport should be viewed from both supply-led and demand-led concepts. Tourism demand could be boosted by the provision of the transport infrastructure; meanwhile tourism use of the transport infrastructure could also stimulate investment in transport infrastructure development (Page, 2005). Therefore the relationship between tourism development and transport development is two-directional rather than single-directional.

The mode of transport and the actual traveling experience often form an integral part of their journeys and experience. However, transport is generally conceived as a passive element in the tourist experience and not comparable with the destination attributes (Page,

2005). Therefore, the tourism-transport relationship is rarely discussed in the context of the tourist experience and is often neglected in existing tourism research.

In general, tourists require safe, reliable and efficient modes of transport, which is an integral part of their total travel experience (Lamb and Davidson, 1996; Page, 2005). Though in most cases in tourism, transport is less important than tourist activities in the destination areas, transport with certain features can act as the main focus of the tourist experience, such as in cruise and scenic, heritage rail trips. Therefore, the integral relationship between the transport and overall tourist experience, the processes and factors involved and their effect on the overall tourist experience need to be further investigated and improved in tourism studies.

#### 2.2.1 Scenic Train Travel

In recent decades, scenic train travel has gradually evolved from travel as a means of transportation to form a new category of tourism, specializing in providing unique onboard experiences for travelers. There are several famous scenic train travel experiences in various parts of the world, such as the Canadian Rocky Mountaineer, the Ghan of Australia, the Trans-Siberia of Russia and, most recently, the newly opened railway from Beijing to Lhasa of Tibet in China. Though all the above trains still function as a form of transportation, there is a significant shift of emphasis to providing a unique onboard travel experience to travelers by specialized route design, and the provision of onboard facilities and services. Those responsible for each of the above train journeys have successfully built a tourism identity that is different from usual trains.

Based on the conceptual framework of tourism developed by Wall and Mathieson (2006), scenic train travel can be considered as a distinctive tourism product, providing pleasant and memorable travel experiences mainly within the train coaches at the time of the journey. The train travel itself can be considered as a simplified mobile “destination”, where most of the destination characteristics do not involve all of the various factors as in the situation of a physical destination in a more usual tourism context. In addition, most of the characteristics are manageable by the train travel providers. Scenic train travelers

can be considered to be a group of people who expect enjoyable quality travel experiences within the limited choices in space, time and facilities for the train journey. The scenic train journeys or vacations largely cater to a niche market by facilitating the unique exploration and appreciation of the scenic landscape and wildlife along the railway line, the comforts of the onboard experience and the opportunity for meaningful social interactions with other people.

By analyzing train travelers' feedback from the websites of Canadian Rocky Mountaineer and Whistler Mountaineer, five major elements forming their train travel experiences were identified: Scenery, Services, Facilities, Food and Information in Su's research (2006). These demands could also be derived from their travel motivations: seeking physical comforts, social interactions and self-development (Su, 2006). Scenery proves to be the primary concern or the fundamental motivation of scenic train travelers. Friendly and convenient services ensure travelers have an enjoyable time during the comparatively long journey. Information provided satisfies travelers' needs for self-development and forms a basis for social interactions. Onboard facilities provide the technological basis for the appreciation of the scenery and the availability of the services. Good food can elevate the overall experience as the journey can not be truly enjoyable without it. Therefore, the five major elements are closely interrelated and form a conceptual picture of travelers' demands for scenic train travel experiences.

Scenic train travel, derived from train travel as means of transportation, is aimed at providing pleasant, comfortable and memorable train travel experiences. Therefore, the function as a transportation tool is weakened, while the emphasis on tourist experience is strengthened.

### 2.3 Tourist Destination Choice Study

Travel destination choice, as one stage of the overall travel decision-making process, has been one of the primary concerns in tourism research. Studies of destination choice could enhance the understanding of tourist decision-making behaviour, and identify and prioritize the various factors influencing the destination selection process. Furthermore,

the interrelations between tourists' socio-demographic characteristics, their motivations and their destination preferences can be measured and illustrated. All these could provide valuable and practical implications for destination planning, development and marketing.

The travel decision-making process is a crucial part of the overall travel process including pre-travel, on-site, and post-travel. It involves the critical travel decisions on whether to go and where to go, leading to the actual travel to certain destinations, which is of primary concern for destination managers and tourism planners.

As widely discussed in the literature, people need both discretionary leisure time and discretionary money as the two prerequisites to engage in tourism and recreation activities (Mieczkowski, 1990). When the two prerequisites are satisfied, individuals then step into the travel decision-making process. Nowadays, in the highly competitive vacation market with a huge variety of facilities and products of tourist destinations, and the generally increased discretionary time and money, potential tourists have more flexibility and choices, which complicates the tourist's decision-making process (Mathieson & Wall, 1982).

Tourists' decision-making within the framework of consumer choice processes has been widely studied for decades. The consumer choice process is influenced by both psychological variables and non-psychological variables. Psychological variables are internal to the consumer, such as motivations, attitudes, beliefs and images; whereas non-psychological variables are external factors influencing the formation of the former, such as time, destination attributes, perceived costs, buyer characteristics and benefits sought (Sirakaya, Sonmez, & Choi, 2001).

In terms of the relationship between the travel decision-making process and destination choice process, the travel decision-making process could be considered as answering two questions, whether to go and where to go. Destination choice is part of the overall travel decision-making process answering the second question. Meanwhile, as outlined by

Mathieson and Wall (Mathieson & Wall, 1982), there are five principal phases in the travel decision-making process:

- 1) Felt need or travel desire
- 2) Information collection and evaluation
- 3) Travel decision
- 4) Travel preparation and travel experience
- 5) Travel satisfaction evaluation

Destination choice usually appears at phase two of information collection and evaluation, when the first phase has been satisfied with recognition of a travel need or desire. At the destination choice stage, attributes of different destinations are collected and compared, and then destination choice is made based on the tourist's individual situation and preference. Afterwards, an overall travel decision including destination, accommodation, transportation and activities is made. In addition, travel experience and evaluation could also influence the next round of destination choice.

Furthermore, as a form of consumer choice, Lancaster's (1966, 1971) characteristics-based theory of consumer choice, saying consumers base their purchase decision on the comparative attributes of a relevant choice set of rival products, could be applied in the travel destination choice process, where tourists choose between destinations with different attractions, facilities and other attributes (Huybers, 2003).

The discrete choice model used in Huybers' (2003) research is based on "random utility theory" assuming choices are made based on the relative utilities derived from alternative options available in a choice set. It is a useful tool to investigate tourist destination choices by analyzing the determinants underlying tourists' destination choices, which could help to identify destination position and potential needs in the market and benefit the strategic planning of destination development and promotion.

Bowden (2006) examined international tourists' main destination choices within China's three major gateway cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Influencing factors to international tourists' destination choice were identified as cultural proxies and cultural

distance, geographical distance, social-demographic attributes, and their respective influences in the case study were also analyzed. The study shows that cultural variables and the origin of tourists are related to destination choice of international tourists.

The stated destination preferences are used in Huybers' (2003) research to represent actual travel. The feasibility of this methodology was illustrated in Pike's research on domestic short break holidays in Australia linking attitudinal data with measures of actual behavior through longitudinal studies. A general consistency between travel attitude and behaviour in the short term has been found such that 75 percent of participants visited one of the listed destinations in their decision set within the three month study period (Pike, 2006). Pike (2006) also found that destinations poorly rated in the decision set composition (attitude) generally receive low actual travel (behaviour); in other words, low awareness of a destination leads to low intent to visit. Therefore, effective and differentiated positioning of a destination into a tourist's decision set increases the attractiveness of a destination and represents a source of competitive advantage (Pike, 2006). The research of Pike (2006), Bowden (2006), and Seddighi and Theocharous (2002) indicate that a traveler survey could be a reliable research method in understanding travelers' decision-making behaviour and identifying their destination decision set.

### 2.3.1 Implications for Destination Planning, Development and Promotion

Destination choice study concentrates on the process through which tourists collect and compare destination information to make their choice, which is a critical part of the travel decision-making process. Based on the literature, different destinations have different attributes relating to different tourist motivations, and one destination attribute may arouse several tourist motivations. Therefore, destination choice research could help to identify highly influential factors in tourists' destination choice process and understand how those important factors affect tourist destination choice. The findings would be useful in establishing the relationship between potential tourist characteristics and their destination preferences in order to define suitable market segments for specific types of tourist destinations. As argued by Baloglu and Uysal (1996), "most successful products



are those which respond best to a bundle of needs within a given market segment". Destination planners and managers should make more efforts in "matching a destination's major attributes to the tourist's diverse psychological needs" (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996, pp 34). Therefore, suitable development and promotion strategies could be developed targeting the specific segments of potential tourists and their specific motivations and needs in response to the existing destination attributes.

Implications and suggestions for destination marketing and positioning would also be generated based on the research on destination choice. The multi-destination choice analysis done by Tussyadiah, Tatsuhito, and Morisugi (2006) provided useful implications for tour operators and destination managers in developing multi-destination products and marketing strategies, such as combining destinations with the preferable proportion of characteristics to increase the utilities of travel and to satisfy the variety-seeking needs of tourists (Tussyadiah, Tatsuhito, & Morisugi, 2006). In addition, tourists usually want to experience more than one attribute in a destination; therefore, preference for one single attribute may come from various motivations. Thus, a proper matching of pull destination attributes with push motivations is a key point in effective destination marketing (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996).

Extensive research in consumer decision theory suggests that images of tourism products and travelers' perceptions of destinations play important roles in the destination decisions of potential travelers. A clear understanding of traveler's motivations, perceptions and images of a destination is crucial for successful destination marketing and positioning (Sirakaya, Sonmez, & Choi, 2001).

A significant relationship between destination attributes and motivations was found in Pyo's research (1998) using the 1985 national survey data of perceptions and preferences of pleasure US travelers for Tourism Canada. Both destination attributes and motivations are important factors influencing tourist destination choice; therefore understanding the linkage between the two can contribute to package tour design, destination management, tourism planning and promotion (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996; Pyo, Mihalik, & Uysal, 1998).

### 2.3.2 Factors Influencing Tourist Destination Choice

In the literature, various factors are identified as significantly influencing tourist destination choice. Destination choice is made largely through interactions between destination attributes and individual tourist motivations (Nicolau & Mas, 2005; Baloglu & Uysal, 1996). Tourist socio-demographic characteristics are also identified as important factors influencing destination choice (Huyber, 2003). Other widely discussed influencing factors are familiarity with the destination, travel experience, expectation and satisfaction. Moreover, these factors will influence tourist destination choice with different degrees of importance specific to each destination and tourist.

#### Socio-demographic Variables

Characteristics of the chosen destination to some extent imply the characteristics, needs and requirements of the tourists; therefore destination choice is also influenced by socio-demographic characteristics of the tourists. Socio-demographic variables are generally included in consumer-related tourism studies as tourist characteristics influencing perceptions of destinations and travel behaviors. Within socio-demographic variables, there are four categories: demographic factors such as age, sex and education; economic factors such as income level; geographical factors such as tourist origin and cultural factors as visitors from different cultures usually have different interpretations of the same destination attributes (Awaritefe, 2004). For example, a different age group could represent a form of subculture due to distinctive value systems, motivations, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour; thus significant differences in needs, wants and lifestyle may appear between different age groups (Sirakaya, Sonmez, & Choi, 2001). Huybers' (2003) research investigating Melbourne tourists' stated destination choice for a domestic overnight holiday also revealed that age and income are important determinants of destination choice. Therefore, socio-demographic variables of a certain group of tourists should be reviewed to understand their destination choice.

#### Tourist Motivation

Why and how people travel to preferred destinations has been a critical and fundamental question in tourism studies; therefore considerable attention has been put on tourist

motivation research in the tourism literature. In addition, the selection of a certain holiday destination implies a desire for a certain kind of benefits; thus motivations play a fundamental role in destination choice by acting as the internal forces leading tourist behaviour in a certain direction (Nicolau & Mas, 2005).

According to Murray (1964), motivation is defined as “an internal factor that arouses, directs, and integrates a person’s behavior”. It is not observed directly but inferred from the behaviour or used to explain the behaviour, which is generally accepted as the definition of motivation (Snepenger, et al., 2006). And tourism motivation, as stated by Dann (1981), is “a meaningful state of mind which adequately disposes an actor or group of actors to travel, and which is subsequently interpretable by others as a valid explanation for such a decision.” A slightly more specific definition of tourism motivation is offered by Crompton and McKay (1997), saying “tourism motivation is conceptualized as a dynamic process of internal psychological factors (needs and wants) that generate a state of tension or disequilibrium within individual” (Snepenger, et al., 2006: pp 427).

Tourist motivation, integrating and emphasizing both psychological and cultural components, is a generic and fundamental term, giving value and direction to travel choice, behaviour and experience (Pearce, 1993). As argued by Pearce (1993), the task of tourist motivation theories and perspectives is to provide a rich list of short and long-term tourist needs differing in scope to be used in specific studies of satisfaction, decision making and marketing, preferably within some hierarchical or integrative framework. In response to the nature of tourist motivations, a dynamic approach should be adopted in motivation research addressing both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and the development of multi-motive perspectives.

As a primary concern to tourism scholars, the importance of motivation studies has long been accepted in tourism research. As summarized by Snepenger et al. (2006) based on various theoretical and practical studies describing, explaining, and predicting tourist motivations, motivations are the fundamental reasons for behaviour. They are critical to

understanding the vacation decision-making process, and foundational to assessing tourist satisfaction from the experience (Snepenger et al., 2006).

One of the extensively used and widely accepted concept explaining tourist motivations is the framework of push and pull factors (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979). This concept of push and pull factors argues that travel behaviour is motivated by two sets of factors. People are pushed by social-psychological variables and individual tourist needs into making a travel decision; on the other hand they are pulled by the attractiveness of the destination area, in another word, destination attributes (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996; Klenosky, 2002; Awaritefe, 2004).

According to Klenosky (2002), push and pull factors generally relate to two separate decisions made at two separate times, being whether to go and where to go. Therefore, push factors are generally considered to precede pull factors. However, the two should not be viewed as operating entirely independently. The interrelationship between the pull attributes of a destination and the social-psychological push factors has been examined and demonstrated in much tourism research to investigate tourist motivation and behaviour (Klenosky, 2002).

As push and pull factors play an important role in tourist travel decisions and destination choice, it is crucial to understand both push and pull factors and the relationship between them to facilitate effective destination planning, development and marketing. Many empirical studies have been done to examine push and pull factors using different approaches, such as qualitative personal interviews, conceptually-based scale development, and multivariate analysis of existing survey data (Klenosky, 2002).

Research has been carried out by Klenosky (2002) on potential pull factors for potential spring break destinations through the means-end approach. He conducted interviews with undergraduate students at mid-western United States colleges to ascertain their preferred destinations and the factors that made those destinations attractive for their next spring break vacation. The findings enhanced the understanding of push and pull relationships and illustrated that one pull attribute of a destination could be derived from various

motivational forces, such as the beach could serve as a location for social interactions, sport activities, or simply for enjoying the natural environment. Therefore, the implication of arousing diversified motivational forces for a single destination attribute from different groups of potential tourists can be derived based on the findings for destination positioning and promotion.

Destination attributes refer to the offerings of a destination in forming the travel experience of tourists, and is considered as the tangible pull attributes of a destination in explaining tourist's destination choice according to push and pull theory (Awaritefe, 2004). In the process of destination choice, destination attributes play an important role in forming tourists' decisions. Common destination attributes discussed in the literature include accommodation, attractions, food, activities, transportation, distance, price, etc. The importance and relevance of those attributes in tourist destination choice differ for each individual destination or group of tourists. Awaritefe (2004) explored the motivations of tourist destination choice in Nigeria by conducting a questionnaire survey for both domestic and international tourists randomly sampled from seven tourism destinations. Attractiveness of destination, quality service, facilities, location and accessibility were demonstrated as important factors in destination choice.

Nicolau and Mas's (2005) empirical research in Spain investigated the effects of distance and price in the destination choice process. The findings show that the constraints of distance and price on destination choice are moderated by social-psychological factors, meaning social-psychological factors have either a direct or inverse effect on the influence of distance and price to destination selection (Nicolau & Mas, 2005). Practically, the understanding of the moderating role of social-psychological factors in the effect of destination attributes such as distance and price on destination choice could help destinations in making geographically and economically targeted marketing strategies (Nicolau & Mas, 2005).

### Travel Experience

Dann (1981) argued that tourism experience or expectations of a holiday, “can act as strong motivators in relation to push factors” (Page & Connell, 2006). In the attempt to predict destination choice through destination loyalty, Oppermann (1999) pointed out the importance of previous travel experience on the destination choice process. As actual destination experience influences an individual’s destination awareness and preferences and is always incorporated in the evaluation stage of future destination decisions, they should be included in the variables influencing destination choice (Oppermann, 1999).

Past literature indicates that travel experience is closely related to tourists’ expectation and satisfaction, both of which are important factors in tourism evaluation. The experience-based model introduced by Woodruff et al (1983) indicated that consumers’ experience should be considered when evaluating their satisfaction during service encounters. Furthermore, Westbrook and Newman (1978) pointed out that people with extensive travel experience tended to develop realistic expectations and showed greater satisfaction ratings than did people without experience. However, limited evidence has been found indicating a positive relationship between experience and satisfaction (Bowie & Chang, 2005). Besides that, as argued by Bowie & Chang (2005), degree of expectation is strongly related to past travel experience and the perception of package tour products.

### Familiarity with the Destination

Familiarity with the destination is not widely discussed in the literature as an important factor influencing destination choice and no consensus has been achieved as to the influence of destination familiarity on destination choice due to the heterogeneous destination preferences of tourists. Pike (2006) argued that familiarity with a destination could minimize perceived risk and provide guaranteed travel experience and ease the decision-making process; therefore repeated visitation to favourite destinations is not uncommon tourism behaviour. However, for people seeking new experiences, familiar destinations may be those they try to avoid in their destination choice. Huyber’s (2003) study also showed that familiarity of a destination constitutes a determinant of destination

choice by enhancing the utility of the destination. In summary, familiarity of the destination does influence destination choice, either positively or negatively; and the influence may differ with different kinds of destinations or different groups of tourists.

#### Travel Expectation and Satisfaction

There is an important correlation between travel expectation and satisfaction identified in the literature. Expectation is achieved mainly at the second phase of information collection and evaluation in the travel decision-making process. Expectations influence the perceptions of the performance of products and services, as well as perceptions of the travel experience, and thus impact travel satisfaction formation (Gnoth, 1997). Therefore, tourist expectation can affect tourist on-site experience and their satisfaction level, and thus influence the next round of destination choices.

Expectations are considered as “desire or wants of consumers” (Parasuraman et al, 1988: pp16) or a pre-consumption attitude before the next purchase indicating what consumers feel the service provider “should offer rather than what they would offer” (Higgs et al., 2005). Expectation represents the service that the customer anticipates (Bowie and Chang, 2005); and experience may or may not be involved.

As reviewed and summarized by Bowie and Chang (2005), expectations are formed when tourists plan to go to a destination where they have never been and anticipate something they have no previous experience. Therefore, many uncontrollable factors are involved in forming customers’ expectation, including previous experience, advertising, customers’ psychological condition at the time of service delivery, customer background and value, and the image of the purchased product. Among them advertising could be considered as an information source, where the images of the purchased product were based on (Bowie and Chang, 2005).

It is also important to look at the sources of information used to form expectations. A range of internal and external sources identified in the literature include marketing

communications, word of mouth referrals, third-party information and prior experience with specific brands or category norms (Higgs et al., 2005).

Based on the investigation of the differences in visitors' expectations pre and post experiences of a major art exhibition, Higgs et al. (2005) concluded that forecast expectations were different to ideal expectations. The finding showed that actual visitation experience also affects visitors' expectations (Higgs et al., 2005).

Mc Gill and Iacobucci (1992) found that satisfaction was not evaluated on pre-experience expectations but on attributes that were generated by the experience itself. Moreover, according to Higgs et al. (2005), pre-experience expectation attributes are rather abstract; while post-experience evaluation attributes were concrete. Level of satisfaction can be influenced by other people during multiple-encounter services in a single transaction (Bowie and Chang, 2005). Tourists satisfaction is mainly based on the combination of their expectation, the service performance of the tour guides and operators, tourists' on-tour attitude and behaviour based on their past travel experiences, and their perception of equity (Bowie and Chang, 2005).

Gnoth (1997) considered expectations as tentative (mental or neural) representations of future events or unfinished learning processes. While, as an emotional response to an experience (Gnoth, 1997), satisfaction is "more closely related to inner-directed or drive-based attitudes and values rather than to outer-directed or cognitive dominant values or attitudes" (Gnoth, 1994, 1997).

As satisfaction is a relative concept judged in relation to certain comparison standard (Oliver, 1996 *from Higgs et al. 2005*), expectation is important as the reference or comparative value for satisfaction judgment (Higgs et al. 2005). Previous studies show that lower expectation results in higher satisfaction and vice versa.

The study by Gnoth (1997) showed that pre-experience expectation focused on abstract attributes such as opportunity for self-development, while post-experience evaluation

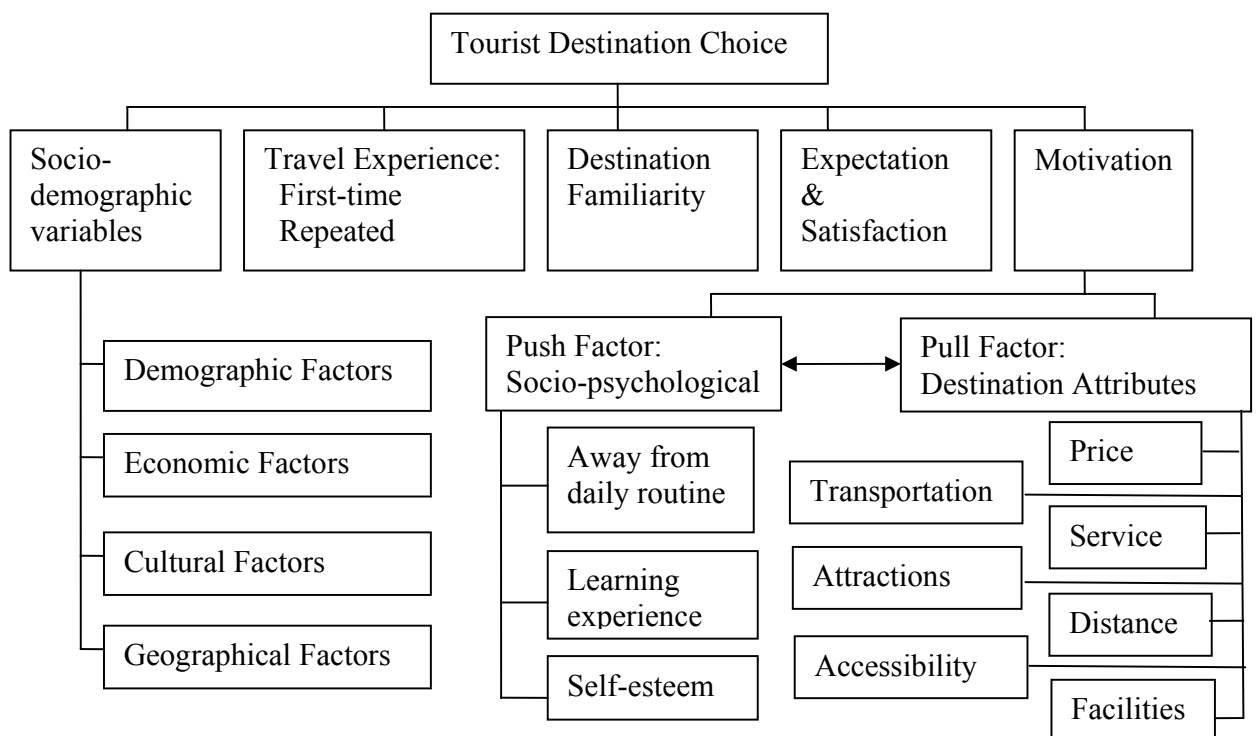


focused more on concrete attributes such as details of the service process, suggesting that “expectation are not clearly formed prior to service delivery and the service itself prompts consumers with the evaluation criteria” (Gnoth, 1997).

## 2.4 Destination Choice Framework

Based on the influencing factors identified above and their interrelationship, a destination choice framework is outlined. Factors influencing destination choice are not limited to those included in the framework. Other factors might not be as influential or commonly recognized, but could play an important role in selecting certain types of destination. Therefore, in destination choice research, a wider perspective should be adopted to identify relevant and important influencing factors for each individual case.

Figure 2.4: Destination Choice Framework



(Source: developed by the researcher)

## 2.5 Gaps Identified in Literature

The following gaps in tourism literature concerning destination choice are identified. First, research in the tourism marketing literature largely focuses on general aspects of motivations and travel decision-making, and only a few studies address issues specifically in the destination choice process. As discussed previously, destination choice usually happens in a later stage in the travel decision-making process, after the decision to travel has been made, and is closely related to destination attributes, many of which are manageable by the destination. Therefore, studies of destination choice could have practical implications in terms of tourist destination planning, marketing and management. Second, few researchers have compared groups of tourists on their destination choice preferences before and after their trip. Furthermore, most researchers examine a limited number of the factors influencing tourist destination choice; thus, although partial frameworks exist, there is a lack of a framework outlining a broader picture including a wide range of important factors that influence tourists' destination choices.

Besides, limited research is available on Tibet tourism, especially research that has been conducted after the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in July 2006. Within the few studies, most investigate macro-aspects, such as number of travelers and amount of revenue generated. None focuses on the train journey from the travelers' perspective, including implications of the train for Tibet tourism, travelers' expectations and satisfactions, and their opinions on the train journey experience. Furthermore, although it is widely recognized that both the journey and the destination are important components in tourism, transport is generally considered as a component in tourism to be endured in order to enjoy the destination experience. Therefore, very few studies have taken the trouble to explore the relative importance of the journey in comparison with the destination and the impact of the journey in tourist destination choice. This is an important aspect of this case study of Tibet.

## 2.6 Chapter Summary

In the context of increasing tourism competition, tourism destinations are challenged to differentiate and position themselves properly to attract more tourists. Therefore, understanding how tourists make destination choices is of critical importance to destination planners and managers.

This chapter reviewed tourism literature about domestic tourism in China, Tibet tourism, transport and tourism, scenic train travel, and previous studies related to destination choice from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. Important factors influencing destination choice are identified based on the literature, which forms the destination choice framework to be applied in the case study of Tibet.

It is found that the research methods generally adopted in exploring the destination choice process are questionnaire surveys or interviews administered to selected groups of tourists. Furthermore, in the tourism marketing literature, most research concentrates on tourist motivation studies or the general travel decision-making process, although some work has been done on the specific destination choice process. Since motivation is just one of the factors that influence tourist destination choice, studies from a purely motivational perspective can only partially explain the destination choice process. In addition, the overall travel decision-making process includes two critical stages, these being whether to go and where to go, and the destination choice process falls into the second stage linking the intention to travel with the actual destination selection. This might provide more practical insights and implications for destination planning, development and marketing. Therefore, more research should be done focusing on destination choice processes for different destinations in order to identify important factors leading tourists to the specific destination and how those factors influence tourist destination choice. Based on research on destination choice, suggestions could be made to direct and facilitate proper development and positioning of tourism destinations specific to their targeted segments of potential tourists.

Besides that, the relation of transport and tourism is not a widely studied tourism issue. In the context of Tibet, transportation is considered to play an important role in tourism development due to the special geographical location. And the recent opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway should be a crucial breakthrough prompting the need to analyze how the railway impacts tourism development in Tibet, travelers' decision-making to Tibet and the relative importance of the train journey in comparison with the destination based on a study of actual train travelers to Tibet.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter outlines the research methods used in this study. First, background information on the Tibet Autonomous Region and the newly-opened Qinghai-Tibet railway is provided. Second, the research methods are presented and the strengths and weaknesses of self-administered questionnaire surveys, questionnaire design and observational methods are discussed. Third, details of the research procedures are explained. Then, methods of data analysis are described. Finally, limitations of the research methods are outlined.

#### **3.1 Introduction to the Study Area**

##### **3.1.1 Tibet Autonomous Region**

Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is located in western China, neighboring Xinjiang, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, and bordering India, Myanmar, Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal (as shown in Figure 3.1.1: The location of Tibet in China and Figure 3.1.2: Administrative map of Tibet). With an average altitude above 4,000 meters, the Tibetan plateau covers an area of 1.2 million square kilometers, surrounded by the Himalaya to the south, the Karakoram to the west and the Kunlun mountains to the north. The Tibetan plateau is also the source of great rivers, such as the Yangtzi River, Yellow River, Nu River (Salween), Lancang River (Mekong) and the Yarlong Tsangpo River (Brahmaputra).

Tibet has a low population size and density compared with other provinces and autonomous regions in China. It had a total population of 2.73 million in 2004. The population of Tibet consists of primarily ethnic Tibetans, who constitute more than 90 percent of the population in the region (China Net, <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/zhuanti/xz05/1131842.htm>); however the proportion of Han people in the region has increased in recent years. Both the written and spoken forms of the Tibetan language are entirely different from the Mandarin Chinese used in mainland China. In terms of religion, Tibet is the traditional centre of Tibetan Buddhism, a distinctive form of Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism is extremely important to ethnic

Tibetans, and is integrated into every aspect of the traditions and daily life of Tibetan people. These distinctive aspects of Tibetan culture contribute substantially to its attractiveness to tourists.

The Tibetan economy is dominated by agriculture due to the geographical features of the region. Livestock raising is the primary occupation due to the limited arable land on the Tibetan Plateau. In recent decades, other industries and infrastructure improvements have been gradually developing in the region. In addition, tourism in Tibet has become increasingly important in terms of its economic contribution to the region. Famous as "The Rooftop of the World" and "The Kingdom of Buddhists", Tibet has rich and unique tourism resources. Undoubtedly a mysterious land to people all over the world, the religious culture and the diverse landscape with high altitude characteristics and adventure tourism sites like the Himalayas attract numerous travelers.

One of the major tourism attractions is the city of Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region. It is located in a mountain-fringed valley at an elevation of 3,658 meter (12,000 feet). With an annual sunlight of more than 3,000 hours, Lhasa is nicknamed the "Sunlight City". The main landmark of Tibet, the Potala Palace, is located in the centre of Lhasa, and is surrounded by many Buddhist temples and monuments. For centuries, pilgrims from all over Tibet and even neighboring provinces have been making pilgrimages to the city.

The Tibet travel planner website summarizes the assets of Tibet from three perspectives of splendid landscape, friendly Tibetan People and the unique religion of Tibetan Buddhism (Tibet travel planner: [http://www.tibettravelplanner.com/why\\_travel.htm](http://www.tibettravelplanner.com/why_travel.htm)), which are considered as the key attractions of Tibet as a tourism destination. Here is a quotation from Tibet travel planner website, describing Tibet as a tourism destination:

No matter how one gets there, a trip to Tibet is a journey out of the ordinary. It gives fresh meaning to the old label: the trip of a lifetime (or perhaps several of them, if reincarnation proves to be true).

I'm not a religious person, or even very spiritual, but this place awakens childhood wonder and silences the ego. Put simply, this place puts me in my place.

(Envoy Travel's Travelogue, 2002, [http://www.tibettravelplanner.com/why\\_travel.htm](http://www.tibettravelplanner.com/why_travel.htm))

Figure 3.1.1: The Location of Tibet in China



Source: <http://www.tibettravel.info/tibet-map/location-map-of-tibet.html>

Figure 3.1.2: Administrative Map of Tibet



(Source: <http://www.chinahighlights.com/tibet/map.htm>)

### 3.1.2 The Qinghai-Tibet Railway

The direct train connecting Beijing and Lhasa first operated on July 1, 2006. The whole train journey takes 48 hours from Beijing to Lhasa (the location of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in China is shown in Figure 3.1.2.1). The Qinghai-Tibet section of the railway is 1,142 kilometers long, stretching across the Tibetan Plateau from Golmud of Qinghai to Lhasa (The route map between Golmud and Lhasa is shown in Figure 3.1.2.2). As the world's highest railway, around 960 kilometers or over 80percent of the Qinghai-Tibet section are at an altitude of more than 4,000 meters above sea level, and over half the length of the railway is laid on permafrost. The Tanggula Pass is 5,072 meters above sea level.

According to Zhang Shuguang (People Daily, 2005.12.12), director of the Transportation Bureau with China's Ministry of Railways, the trains running on the Qinghai-Tibet Railway are the most advanced in China, with all carriages installed with oxygen-supplying equipment. The train runs at a speed of 160 km per hour on the plains, but



slows to 120 km per hour when it reaches the Qinghai-Tibet section (People Daily, 2005.12.12). In addition to Beijing, direct passenger trains are now in service from Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu and many other major cities of China to Lhasa ( as shown in Table 3.1.2).

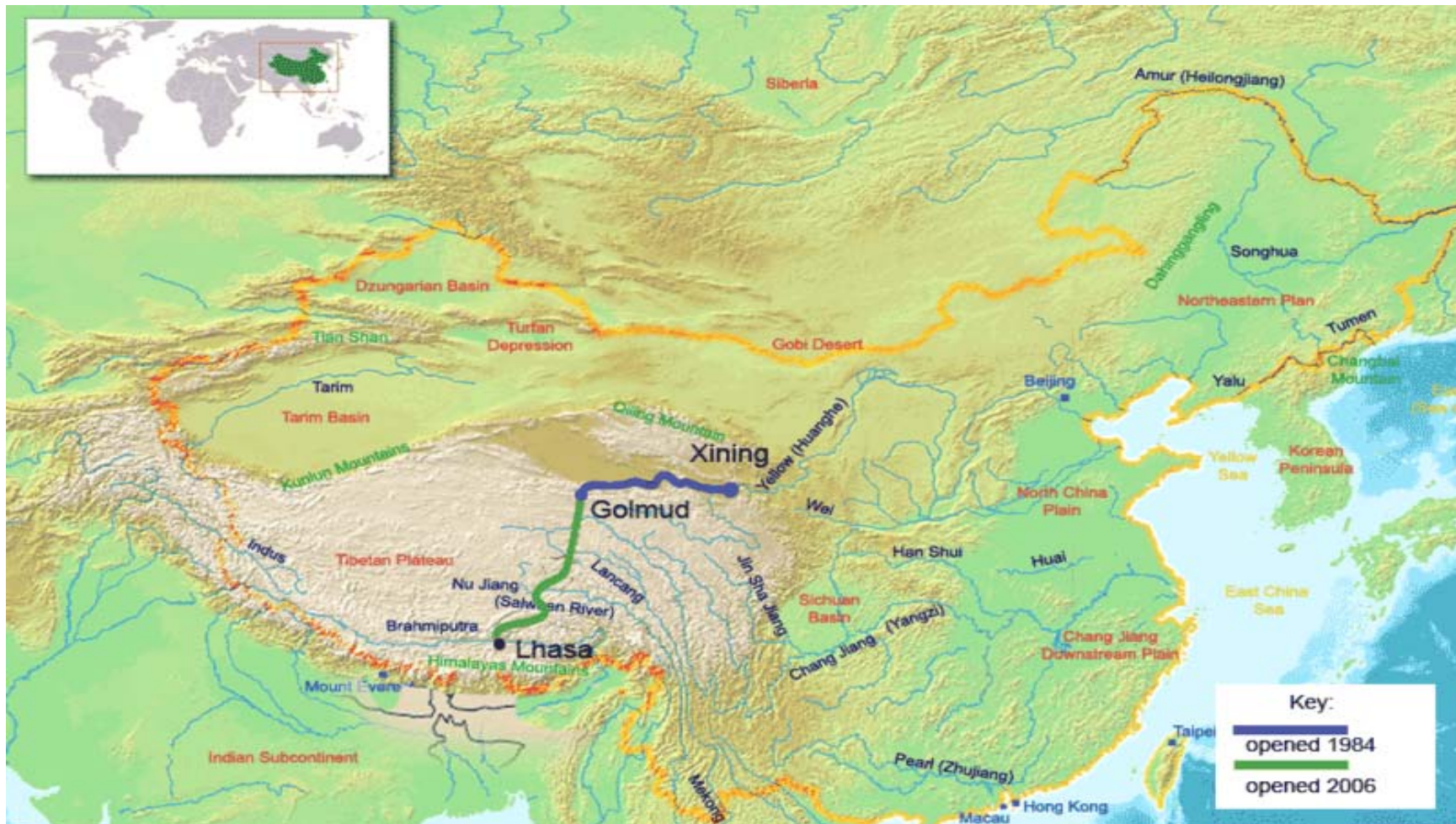
Table 3.1.2: Direct Train Service from Major Cities in China to Lhasa, Tibet

Train No.	From/To	Kilometer	Price (RMB)		
			Hard Seat	Hard Sleeper (lower berth)	Soft Sleeper (lower berth)
T27/28	Beijing west	4064	389	813	1262
T22/23/24/21	Chengdu	3360	331	712	1104
T222/223/224/221	Chongqing	3654	355	754	1168
T164/165/166/163	Shanghai	4373	406	845	1314
T262/264	Guangzhou	4980	451	923	1434
K917/K918	Lanzhou	2188	242	552	854
N917/N918	Xining	1972	226	523	810

(Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qinghai-Tibet\\_Railway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qinghai-Tibet_Railway))

The train ticket of the Qinghai-Tibet railway has no difference from other train tickets in China as shown in Figure 3.1.2.4. Figure 3.1.2.3 shows the train running through Tibet Plateau. And Figure 3.1.2.5 and Figure 3.1.2.6 shows the typical view train travelers will get in the Qinghai-Tibet section of the railway.

Figure 3.1.2.1 Location Map of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway



(Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qinghai-Tibet\\_Railway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qinghai-Tibet_Railway))

Figure 3.1.2.2: The Route of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway from Golmud to Lhasa



(Source: <http://www.tibettravelplanner.com/train-pictures.htm>)

Figure 3.1.2.3: The Train Running Through Tibet Plateau



(Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qinghai-Tibet\\_Railway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qinghai-Tibet_Railway))

Figure 3.1.2.4: Train Ticket



(Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qinghai-Tibet\\_Railway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qinghai-Tibet_Railway))



Figure 3.1.2.5 View along the Qinghai-Tibet Railway - River



Figure 3.1.2.6 View along the Qinghai-Tibet Railway - Snow-covered Mountain



(Source: photo taken by the researcher)

### 3.2 Research Methods

In order to achieve the objective of the study, a questionnaire survey was chosen as the main research method for primary data collection. The questionnaire was delivered by the researcher to travelers on the train from Beijing to Lhasa and from Lhasa to Beijing. In addition, the researcher's observations both on the train and at the destination provide complementary information.

#### 3.2.1 Questionnaire Survey

A questionnaire survey was chosen as the primary research method in this study because of its cost-effectiveness in collecting data and its suitability for investigating the phenomena in question (Seddighi, 2000). It could satisfy the research purpose of getting first-hand information from a sample of travelers on the train. The major advantage of self-administered questionnaire surveys is that a large number of respondents can be reached to facilitate quantitative analysis. However the depth of the information is restricted by the limited time spent on each individual respondent and the standardized questions and format designed for the targeted population in general.

Based on a review of previous studies cited below, self-administered questionnaire surveys were identified as commonly-used, relevant and effective research methods in tourism researches from the tourists' perspective. They have been widely used, for example, in studies of motivations, expectations and satisfactions, destination image, and destination choice. For example, Awaritefe (2004) conducted a questionnaire survey of both domestic and international tourists randomly sampled from seven tourism destinations in Nigeria to investigate the motivations underlying tourist destination choice in a Third World country. A destination-based questionnaire survey was administered to international tourists by Bowden (2006) to examine the cross-cultural differences in destination choices within China's three major gateway cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Higgs, Polonsky and Hollick (2005) investigated the differences between visitors' expectations and experiences, using a pre and post method, based on a total of 550 questionnaires administered to two sub-samples of visitors during a major art exhibition. Seddighi and Theocharous (2002) developed a theoretical framework to

explain tourist destination choices to visit Cyprus. They used the characteristics of tourists and tourism products as key determinants and collected 172 valid questionnaires from tourists. Sirakaya, Sonmez, and Choi (2001) investigated the role of image on the destination choices of potential travelers by analyzing 305 valid questionnaires obtained from students in four geographically dispersed universities in the United States. Kim, Jogaratnam and Noh (2006) conducted email questionnaires with students in an American university to examine the push and pull motivations for their international leisure travel destination selections based and obtained 469 valid responses. These studies show that questionnaire surveys are a common methodology employed by researchers investigating similar topics to the one that is explored here.

#### 3.2.1.1 Questionnaire Design

Two sets of questionnaires were designed for train passengers to be administered on the outward and return journeys. Very few passengers originated in Tibet: almost all got on the train in China mainland to go to Tibet or were returning from Tibet to China mainland. In order to maintain the comparability of the pre and post-visit questionnaires, the majority of questions were the same in both questionnaires. Changes were made in sections pertaining to the expected actual destination experience.

The first section of the questionnaire was designed to acquire information on each respondent's journey. The second section focused on travel expectations and satisfactions, and their experiences both on the train and at the destination. The respondents were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale, with ratings ranging from "very unimportant" to "very important" or "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree", their expectation of the destination and their degree of satisfaction with the train journey. The third section was used to collect demographic and socio-economic data, including gender, age, place of origin, education level, monthly income and employment. The fourth section was added to the post-visit questionnaire requesting recommendations that could enhance the tourism product at the destination and on the train journey based on their actual travel experiences.

Both close-ended questions and open-ended questions were used. The first three sections were composed mainly of close-ended questions, which were easy to answer and facilitate statistical analysis. Questions in the fourth section of the post-visit questionnaire were open-ended, offering more flexibility to participants to expressing their opinions on their travel experience, and to identify problems and make suggestions. The close-ended questions were composed of dichotomous questions, multiple choices, and 5-point Likert scale questions.

The major advantage of open-ended questions is that the answers are not restricted by the researcher's knowledge and perspective, so the probability of missing important factors is lowered. However, as answers are more diverse and more detailed, it is usually difficult and time-consuming to conduct statistical and comparative analysis. Close-ended questions are relatively easy to answer, analyze and compare; but they may induce researcher's bias by offering answers or wording slanted in a particular direction. To counteract this effect, an open-ended alternative was added to some questions, providing respondents with a place to voice out their own opinion when it was not covered by the available choices. Thus, in order to balance the strengths and weaknesses of the two methods, and to achieve more representative and convincing results, a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions was used.

The destination choice framework proposed in Chapter two was referred as a guideline in designing the structure and contents of questionnaire. It also guided the composing of individual questions and answer choices in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire survey was used for both Chinese and foreign travelers. Therefore, it was first developed in English and then translated by the researcher into Chinese, both of which went through pilot tests before being finalized (see below).

#### 3.2.1.2 Survey Design

The questionnaire survey was targeted at passengers on the train between Beijing and Lhasa of Tibet. They are the actual tourists who have chosen Tibet as their travel



destination and the train as their mode of transportation. The total capacity of the train between Beijing and Lhasa is 936 passengers and the train journey takes about 48 hours, which was the maximum possible survey time in each direction.

There are various survey delivery methods, such as mail surveys, telephone interviews, web surveys, face-to-face and household surveys. Each method has advantages and disadvantages and is suitable for different research needs. In this research, the targeted population was travelers on the train between Beijing and Lhasa, and between Lhasa and Beijing. The questionnaire survey was delivered by the researcher to randomly selected travelers on the train (see below for detailed sample selection procedure). While delivering the questionnaire, the researcher could introduce the purpose of the survey and ensure the meaning of the questions were properly understood by the respondents, and any ambiguities could be spotted and clarified. In addition, it would not be possible to use mail or phone surveys because no contact list was available. Questionnaires being delivered by the researcher on the train ensured that the target population is accessed. Moreover, the quality of the survey responses and the number of usable questionnaires could be ensured. The disadvantage of this questionnaire delivery method is that the presence of the researcher and the interaction with respondents may introduce biases.

### 3.2.2 Researcher's Observations

The second research method that was used was observation, both on the train and at the destination. Observation is a useful research method to get first-hand data on the participants (Creswell, 2003). On the train, I observed the activities engaged in by the passengers, such as enjoying the view along the route, chatting with other passengers, reading or other activities. The purpose was to find out passengers' reaction to and the utilization of onboard services and facilities. At the destination, I observed the tourism facilities, activities and services available and travelers' behavior in order to acquire a first hand impression of the local tourism development status.

Observation is flexible, qualitative and reflects the first-hand experience gained in the research area from the researcher's perspective. It can be a valid and effective

accompaniment to quantitative research methods. However, there are problems with reliability and generalizability of findings based solely on the researcher's observation because it is inevitably limited by the specific time and location of the observation being conducted and highly subjective according to the researcher's perceptions, biases and interpretations (Babbie, 1998; Creswell, 2003).

### 3.2.3 Secondary data collection

Limited by accessibility and resources, not all data used in this study are primary data gathered by the researcher. Secondary data are also used in this study, including national or provincial statistics, government reports and news reports. To ensure the credibility of the secondary data used in this study, data were taken from official websites at a national scale, including National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/>), China National Tourism Administration (CNTA, <http://www.cnta.gov.cn/index.asp>), Tibet Tourism Bureau (Tibet tour, <http://www.tibettour.org/>), and Tibet Channel of Xinhua News Agency (<http://www.xz.xinhuanet.com/>).

## 3.3 Research Procedures

### 3.3.1 Pilot Test

A pilot test was carried out before the actual questionnaire survey with the targeted sample. The purpose of the pilot test was to ensure the clarity and conceptualness of the questionnaire, to evaluate whether the wording of the questionnaire would convey the intended meaning effectively and to measure how long it would take to complete the questionnaire. Although the majority of passengers on the train were expected to be Chinese, there would be international tourists on board as well. Therefore, each pair of pre- and post-visit questionnaires was prepared in both Chinese and English. As a result, the pilot test was conducted separately with Chinese-speaking and English-speaking participants. They read through the questionnaire, answered the questions and provided their inputs on the wording of the questionnaires. For the Chinese version of the questionnaires, five Chinese students at the University of Waterloo and five Chinese in Beijing from different age group and education levels were selected. As the English version of the questionnaires was approved by my supervisor and committee members,

just two Canadian students at the University of Waterloo were selected for the pilot test. The final Chinese and English versions of the questionnaires were developed based on the feedback from the pilot test.

### 3.3.2 Timing of the Research

The field research was undertaken on the train both ways between Beijing and Lhasa from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2007, which is during the peak travel season of Tibet from May to October when the weather is warm and suitable for travel and the majority of travelers to Tibet go during that time.

### 3.3.3 Questionnaire Survey Operation

There are several major stops during the train journey as shown in Table 3.2.3, such as Xi'an, Lan Zhou and Xi Ning, where many passengers get off and on the train. When selecting the survey time, besides considering the schedule of the train, passengers were also given time to form their own judgments on their experience of the train journey, the services and the facilities. Therefore, on the train from Beijing to Lhasa, the survey time was selected to be after 7pm on the second day of the journey, when the train had passed Xi Ning, the last major stop before the Qinghai-Tibet section between Golmud and Lhasa. This ensured that a high proportion of passengers were destined for Lhasa. On the train from Lhasa to Beijing, the survey time was chosen to be late in the afternoon of the first day before Golmud and Xi Ning station where a large number of travelers from Tibet would get off the train.

The train contains three types of seats: soft sleepers, hard sleepers and hard seats. The questionnaire survey was conducted in the hard sleeper cars with a total capacity of 60 beds in each car. This means that respondents in the cheapest and most expensive seats were not interviewed. The hard sleeper car is the major type of car on the train with 9 cars out of the total 16 cars of the train. There are significant price differences for different car types. Therefore, differences in travelers' demographic and socio-economic characteristics are expected among travelers in different car types. Surveying passengers in all three kinds of cars could introduce variations in travelers' profiles and experiences

induced by ticket price and associated facilities, which could affect further analysis of the data. Therefore, in this study, only passengers on hard sleeper cars, which are the major type of cars on the train, were approached in the questionnaire survey, which controlled for the differences in travelers' profile induced by different ticket price in the sample. Nevertheless, as will be seen, substantial diversity existed in the personal characteristics of respondents.

To ensure the adequacy of data for statistical analysis and generalization of the research findings, a cluster sampling technique was adopted. In such a scheme, the entire population is divided into clusters; then a random sample of these clusters is selected and all observations in the selected clusters are included in the sample.

In this study, the cars represent potential clusters. I started the questionnaire survey from the car I was in, distributing questionnaires to every traveler who was available at the time of distribution and willing to fill out the questionnaire survey. Then I continued with adjacent cars in one direction until I collected enough questionnaires for my study. My seat was randomly assigned at the time of purchasing the ticket, therefore, it could be considered as a random start. Moreover, there is no specific seat arrangement in each car and no difference in traveler profile should be expected from one car to another. Therefore, passengers on the train could be considered as randomly distributed in each car. Every available passenger in each car was approached for the questionnaire survey until the intended number of questionnaires was collected.

In each car, I explained the purpose and requirements of the questionnaire survey and distributed the questionnaires to every available traveler. Then I waited in the car in case of questions on the contents of the questionnaire or any other questions. During that time, I also chatted with some travelers about their ideas of Tibet and traveling to Tibet. Questionnaires were collected about 20 minutes later when all respondents had finished filling them in. Then I continued with the next car with the same procedure.

For each trip, four cars were visited in around 4 hours to distribute and collect questionnaires. A total of 82 useable questionnaires were collected on the train from Beijing to Lhasa and 105 useable questionnaires were collected on the train from Lhasa to Beijing. The response rate was 35percent for the pre-visit sample and 44percent for the post-visit sample. Those who did not participate in the questionnaire survey included those who were not going to Lhasa, those who were not at their seats during the time of the survey, those who were lying in their beds sleeping or relaxing, and those who were not willing to participate in the questionnaire survey. There is no reason to believe that travelers not participating in the questionnaire survey were substantially different from those who completed the questionnaires.

Table 3.2.3: Train Schedule between Beijing and Lhasa

Station	Arrival Time	Departure Time	Distance (km)
<b>T27: Beijing - Lhasa</b>			
Beijing West	Departure Station	21:30	
Shijiazhuang	23:49	23:51	277
Xian	08:36 +	08:48	1,200
Lanzhou	15:06	15:21	1,876
Xining	18:14	18:29	2,092
Golmud	05:23 ++	05:43	2,922
Nakchu	15:47	15:51	3,742
Lhasa	20:00	Arrival Station	4,064
<b>T28:Lhasa-Beijing</b>			
Lhasa	Departure Station	08:30	
Nakchu	11:59	12:05	322
Golmud	22:05	22:25	1,142
Xining	09:14 +	09:29	1,972
Lanzhou	12:21	12:36	2,188
Xian	20:12	20:28	2,864
Shijiazhuang	05:13++	05:15	3,787
Beijing West	7:34	Arrival Station	4,064

'+' the second day, '++' the third day.

(Source: Travel China Guide, <http://www.travelchinaguide.com/cityguides/tibet/train-to-tibet/train-schedule.htm>)

### 3.4 Data Analysis

All close-ended questions were coded into SPSS. The majority of the questions were answered using a 5-point Likert scale, which was coded as 1 for the lowest level of expectation or satisfaction, 3 for the neutral point and 5 for the highest level of expectation or satisfaction. Mean and standard deviation scores were calculated

Various statistical techniques in SPSS were used to explore and analyze the quantitative data collected through the two sets of questionnaires from pre- and post-visit samples. The most frequently used techniques were descriptive statistics to examine responses to each question. Based on different types of variables, independent sample t-tests, Chi-square tests and one-way ANOVA tests were used in examining between-group differences across variables between the pre- and post-visit samples. Besides SPSS, Excel was used in recoding, managing and examining the qualitative data collected from the open-ended questions in the questionnaires, and to assist in the identification of common themes.

### 3.5 Limitations of Research Methods

#### 3.5.1 Timing of the Research

It was originally intended that the research would be conducted during the Golden Week Holiday between 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2007. However, train tickets were very difficult to get during that time because of the high demand. Therefore, research on the train could only be conducted starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2007, which is considered as the shoulder season of Tibet tourism between the Golden Week Holiday and the summer holiday period.

Differences in traveler profiles are to be expected between peak and non-peak seasons. During peak seasons, a much larger number of travelers from more diversified backgrounds both on the train and in Tibet are to be expected. Moreover, there are huge differences in terms of the number of visitors and the price of travel products between peak and non-peak seasons. Therefore, travelers in Tibet would have different destination experiences, local service quality and travel expenses while traveling during peak and

non-peak seasons. Thus, their satisfaction levels and perceptions of the destination and the train journey might also differ. Nevertheless, the present study can provide useful insights into perceptions of both the journey and the destination.

### 3.5.2 Sample Selection

As described above, the questionnaire survey was conducted on the train between Beijing and Lhasa, targeting only travelers who used the train to or from Lhasa. However, travelers by air or bus may have different perceptions on the train journey and the destination and different perspectives on Tibet tourism, which is not represented in this study. Although travelers by air constitute a high percentage of travelers to Tibet according to the official website of Tibet tourism, every day after the opening of the railway about 2,000 travelers to Lhasa arrive by air and about 4,000 by train (<http://www.xizanglhasa.cn/ShowNews.jsp>). Thus, train travelers are now in the majority. Second, travelers taking the train from Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing or Chengdu to Lhasa were excluded from this sample. It is possible that geographical origin might induce differences in perceptions of the train journey and of Tibet as a destination; travelers from these cities are not represented in this study.

Since the survey was undertaken on the train, it only targeted travelers who had already overcome the barriers to making the trip to Tibet. Therefore, the motivational function of push factors, which are the social-psychological factors influencing people's travel decision rather than their destination choice, may not be effectively reflected in the results.

The majority of travelers were traveling for personal, probably pleasure, reasons in both pre- and post-visit samples. As the sample size is relatively small, business travelers and travelers visiting relatives and friends were not of sufficient number to be compared with the major category of personal travelers. In fact, they constitute a small proportion of the sample and, therefore, the sample was analyzed as a whole and no comparisons were conducted among travelers with different purposes of travel on their perceptions of Tibet tourism and the railway.

### 3.6 Chapter Summary

In summary, a self-administered questionnaire survey and personal observation were used as the primary data collection techniques. The survey was used to collect data amenable to quantitative analysis on tourists' perceptions of the impacts of the Qinghai-Tibet train on their travel decisions and their experiences of Tibet as a tourism destination. Personal observation provided qualitative information on the journey and destination experience to complement the quantitative analysis based on the questionnaire surveys.



## **4. Findings**

This chapter summarizes the findings of respondents' perceptions of the train journey and the destination of Tibet through quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data collected on the train journeys in both directions between Beijing and Lhasa.

### **4.1 Method of Analysis**

Data was obtained from the questionnaire survey conducted from 13<sup>th</sup> May to 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2007 on the train journeys in both directions between Beijing and Lhasa. As discussed in Chapter Three, information was collected on the motivations, expectations and satisfactions with the destination and the train journey, as well as respondents' characteristics. The pre-visit sample size is 82 and the post-visit sample size is 105. A number of statistical tests were performed to examine and evaluate the data, including descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, Chi-square tests and one-way ANOVA tests.

The questionnaire results are reported in six sections. The first section presents the demographic and social-economic profile of the respondents. In the second section, the travel behavior pattern, including basic trip information, expenses and information sources are reported. The third section explores the motivation for traveling to Tibet. This section combines the pre- and post-visit samples into one data set. Then, differences between pre-visit expectations and post-visit satisfactions with the destination are examined in the fourth section. The fifth section explores respondents' perceptions and satisfactions with the train journey, undertaking a comparison between the pre- and post-visit samples. The final section reports a qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions on the post-visit questionnaires. This section is concerned with respondents' ideas and suggestions about Tibet tourism and the train journey.

## 4.2 Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic and socio-economic characteristics of respondents in the pre-visit and post-visit samples are presented below. Between-sample differences will be examined and the study sample as a whole will be compared with the data from the literature.

### 4.2.1 Demographic Characteristics

Summaries of the demographic characteristics of the pre- and post-visit samples and the combined sample are reported in Table 6.4.1. There are more males (63%) than females (37%) in pre-visit sample and this is also marginally the case in the post-visit sample. However, the difference in gender representation between the pre- and post-visit samples is not statistically significant (Chi-square =2.860,  $p = .091$ ). The sample is widely dispersed in terms of age groups. People aged 25 to 34 and 35 to 44 each constitute 25 percent of the total sample suggesting that the majority of travelers were aged between 25 and 44. Only 3 percent of all respondents were above 65 years of age, which is substantially lower than other age categories.

In terms of respondents' places of origin, only 8 international travelers responded to the survey and these were from the United States, the United Kingdom, Slovakia, Switzerland and Germany. The rest of the 179 respondents were Chinese. As shown in Table 6.4.1, among the 160 respondents who provided detailed information on their place of origin, the majority of the respondents (80%) were from northern China, with 30 percent from Beijing and Tianjin; 18 percent from northwest provinces, 18 percent from central northern provinces and 14 percent from northeast provinces. This supports Wang's (2006) prediction that the Qinghai-Tibet railway would provide more convenience and would be used most by people from the northwest, northeast and central northern provinces (Wang, 2006). Only 20 percent of respondents were from Southern China. The route from Beijing to Lhasa is not the priority choice for people from the south who are more likely to take the train to Lhasa from Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu or Chongqing.

A comparison of the demographic characteristics of respondents in the pre- and post-visit groups was also conducted (Table 4.2.1). No statistically significant between-group

differences were identified; therefore it is justifiable to combine the two samples into one combined sample in analysis of respondents' demographic characteristics.

Table 4.2.1: Demographic characteristics of pre- and post-visit samples

Demographics	Respondent Groups			Chi-square	Sig. (2-sided)
	Pre-visit	Post-visit	Total Sample		
Sample Size (n)	82	105	189		
Gender (%)				2.860	.091
Male	63	50	55.6		
Female	37	48	42.8		
Age (%)				5.381	.371
18-24	12	16	14		
25-34	28	23	25		
35-44	29	21	25		
45-54	13	22	18		
55-64	12	13	13		
> 65	5	2	3		
Place of Origin					
No. of International	3	5	8		
No. of Chinese	79	100	179		
Distribution of Chinese (%)				.309	.578
China North	73	65	80		
Beijing/Tianjin	22	31	30		
Northwest	29	8	18		
Northeast	10	14	14		
North central	21	12	18		
China South	18	18	20		

#### 4.2.2 Socio-economic Characteristics

The socio-economic characteristics of the pre- and post-visit samples and the combined sample are shown in Table 4.2.2, including education levels, monthly incomes and employment. In terms of education, the majority (75%) of respondents has university or higher education and 23 percent have high school education. This suggests that the travelers are a very well-educated group. With respect to respondents' monthly income, the category of RMB 1,500 to 2,999 constitutes 40 percent of the sample, followed by the category of below RMB 1,500 (25%) and the category of RMB 3,000 to 4,499 (23%). Wang's (2006) research based on a residents' survey in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu and Wuhan

conducted in 2003 on Tibet tourism (Wang, 2006), showed that 40 percent were from the category of RMB 2,000-3,999 and 30 percent were from RMB 1,000 to 1,999. The National Bureau of Statistics of China reported that the 2006 average monthly salary in Chinese cities was RMB1,750 (NBSC, [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjdt/zygg/sjxdtzgg/t20070323\\_402393903.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjdt/zygg/sjxdtzgg/t20070323_402393903.htm)) Therefore, it can be concluded that, in line with their higher education, the sample in this study has an above average income level.

Most respondents were employed either by a company or government or other institutions. Almost half (49%) were found to be in these employment categories. Only 15 percent were self-employed. Students (14 %) and retired people (13%) were of approximately the same proportions, each constituting a substantial minority market among train travelers to Tibet.

Table 4.2.2: Socio-economic Characteristics of Pre- and Post-visit Samples

	Respondent Groups			Chi-square	Sig. (2-sided)
	Pre-visit	Post-visit	Total Sample		
Sample Size (n)	82	105	189		
Education (%)				6.252	.044*
Primary School	0	2	1		
High School	30	16	23		
University and above	70	79	75		
Monthly Income (%)				2.911	.573
< 1,500	20	30	25		
1,500 – 2,999	44	36	40		
3,000 – 4,499	24	22	23		
4,500 – 6,000	6	5	5		
> 6,000	6	5	5		
Career (%)				12.055	.061
Student	9	18	14		
Employed	49	50	49		
Teacher	4	9	6		
Company Employee	37	25	30		
Government Employee	9	16	13		
Self-employed	16	14	15		
Retired	17	10	13		
Others	10	6	7.5		

\* Statistically significant at .05 level

#### 4.2.3 Summary of Travelers' Characteristics

Chi-square tests were used to examine the between-group differences of the two samples (Table 4.2.1 and Table 4.2.2). The results showed no statistically significant difference between pre- and post-visit groups in terms gender, age, place of origin, career and monthly income. The only statistically significant difference (at the .05 level) between the samples was for education with a Chi-square value of .044. Despite the between-sample difference identified, high education level was noticed for both pre- and post- samples with higher than 70 percent respondents having university or above education. Therefore, overall, the differences are small and, not surprisingly, people traveling in both directions had similar characteristics.

Table 4.2.3: Comparison of Demographic and Social-economic Characteristics

Demographics	General Chinese*	Five Cities **	My sample
Sample Size (n)		2296	189
Gender (%)			
Male	47.2	75.5	57
Female	52.8	24.5	43
Age (%)			
18-24	11.1	11.3	14
25-44	36.6	49.1	50
45-64	38.6	39.5	31
> 65	6.7	0	3
Education (%)			
Primary school	9.3	0	1
High school	56.8	55.8	23
University or above	34.0	44.2	75

\* Data drawn from “2002 Chinese domestic tourism sampling survey report”. (《中国国内旅游抽样调查资料》, 2002)

\*\* Data drawn from the research done in April 2003, *Tibet tourism after the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway* (Wang, 2006)

In summary, the data suggest that train travelers to Tibet are from diverse age groups and employment categories, with perhaps slightly more males than females, generally high education levels and higher than average monthly incomes. This supports Wang's (2006) conclusion that tourists to Tibet are generally people with a high education level, high

income, high consumption level and comparatively good health. A comparison between the sample of this study and general Chinese tourists as well as tourists to Tibet identified in the five-city survey in Wang's research (2006) is presented in Table 4.2.3. It illustrates the similarity between the sample in this study and the sample from the five-city survey. Therefore, this sample appears to be representative of travelers to Tibet.

Wang (2006) also pointed out that after the opening of the railway, the percentage of travelers with a lower income might increase. However the general traveler profile will likely remain the same because traveling to Tibet requires a long time and involves high expenses. Also, the unique cultural and natural features of Tibet may be more attractive to experienced tourists with a higher education level. Furthermore, the high altitude location of Tibet requires good physical health.

Overall, the pre- and post-visit samples were similar in their demographic and socio-economic features. Therefore, it would be reasonable to infer that any observed differences between pre- and post-visit samples with respect to expectations, perceptions and satisfactions with the train journey and the destination cannot be explained by these demographic and socio-economic factors. In addition, when analyzing the common questions in the pre- and post-visit questionnaires, it is justifiable to combine the two data sets into one.

#### 4.3 Travel Behavior Pattern

Travel behaviour patterns of the respondents were investigated in the questionnaire survey in order to examine whether there were differences between pre- and post-visit responses, and between the study sample and general travelers in China. Basic trip information, trip expenses and sources used to acquire travel information were examined. Both length of stay and trip expenses were separated into expectations from the pre-visit sample and actual ones from the post-visit sample.

Despite a statistically significant between-group difference (Chi-square= 9.973;  $p=.007$ ) at the .05 level, the high percentage of first-time visitors to Tibet among respondents was consistent in both pre- and post-visit samples (pre-visit: 83%; post-visit: 95%). Therefore,

it could be concluded that the majority of respondents were traveling to Tibet for the first time (82% for the overall sample), which shows that Tibet is still a new tourism destination to most travelers. This finding is supported by Wang's study showing that very few people in China have been to Tibet, but the majority of them wish to go, which indicates the potential market for Tibet tourism (Wang, 2006).

Table 4.3.1: Comparison of the Basic Trip Information between Pre- and Post-visit Samples

	Pre-visit	Post-visit	Total Sample	Chi-square	Sig. (2-sided)
First time to Tibet (%)	83	95	90	9.973	.007*
Purpose of travel (%)				1.334	.513
Personal	81	84	82		
FIT	85	47	68		
Group	15	37	32		
Business	15	14	14		
Visiting friends/relatives	5	2	3		
Transportation the other way (%)				3.588	.309
Train	68	64	66		
Plane	27	34	31		
				t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Length of stay				.593	.555
Number	64	104	168		
Mean	6.6	6.2	6.4		
S.D.	4.946	2.906	3.805		

\* Statistically significant at .05 level

As shown in Table 4.3.1, no statistically significant differences were identified at the .05 level among other factors of the basic trip information examined; therefore the pre and post-visit samples can be viewed as one. In terms of their purpose of travel, 82 percent respondents went for personal reasons, 14 percent for business and only 3 percent to visit friends and relatives. Thus, the great majority were on holiday. Among the category of personal travel, the majority chose self-arranged travel (68%) instead of joining tour groups offered by travel agencies (32%). For all respondents, the transportation choice for the entire journey was predominantly by train (66%). The remainder traveled in one direction by plane (31%).

Tourists to Tibet have a distinctive traveling pattern due to the characteristics of the destination itself. One feature is that the length of stay is longer than in other tourism destinations in China. According to sample data collected in 2003, the average length of stay for tourists to Tibet was 7.8 days (Wang, 2006). In this study, the mean length of stay in the overall sample is 6.4 days.

Table 4.3.2: Comparison of Expected and Actual Expenses

	Pre-visit Expected expense	Post-visit Actual expense	Overall sample	Five Cities**
Number	82	102	184	2296
Mean	2.07	2.44	2.28	
Std. Deviation	.953	.981	.983	
Between-group Diff. t-score		-2.570		
Sig. (2-tailed)		.011 *		
Expenses RMB (%)				
1 < 3500	33	19	24.6	32.6
2 3500-4999	35	35	34.8	42.3
3 5000-6500	23	29	26.2	21.2
4 >6500	9	17	12.8	3.9

\* Statistically significant at .05 level

\*\* Data from the survey done in April 2003, Tibet tourism after the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway (Wang, 2006)

In terms of total trip expenses, as shown in Table 4.3.2, the expected expenses for the pre-visit sample were lower than the actual expenses for the post-visit sample and the difference was statistically significant ( $t=-2.570$ ,  $p=.011$ ). Therefore, tourists to Tibet often spend more than they expect to spend. In terms of the actual amount of expenses, according to 2003 sample data, the average total trip expenses were RMB 4,231 and the daily expenses were RMB 542.5, which is 9 times the average trip expenses in other destinations in China (Wang, 2006). In this study, 35 percent respondents spent between 3,500 to 5,000 in both pre- and post-visit samples, which was the most common expense category indicated. Furthermore, as illustrated in Table 4.3.2, the distribution of expenses in this study is similar to the data drawn from the five-city survey in 2003 (Wang, 2006).

Mass and traditional media, such as TV and newspapers and magazines, remain the most important and widely used information sources for Tibet tourism. More than half (54%) of all



respondents used TV and 29 percent of respondents used newspapers and magazine to acquire travel information on Tibet. Word-of-mouth referrals from friends and relatives were used by a quarter (25%). The Internet is acquiring increasing importance as a media channel for disseminating and accessing travel information with 24 percent of respondents using it to collect information on Tibet. However, it is not yet as important as the traditional media channels. Only 14 percent of respondents got Tibet travel information from travel agencies. This suggests the low utility level of travel agencies as an information source, which might be addressed in the future operation of travel agencies. The majority (52%) of respondents consulted only one source of information prior to visiting Tibet; and about one third (34%) of respondents consulted two sources of information.

Table 4.3.3: Information Sources for Tibet Tourism

	Pre-visit	Post-visit	Total Sample	z-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Information sources					
Friends & relatives	20 (24%)	26 (25 %)	46 (25%)	-.092	.927
Newspaper & Magazine	24 (29%)	31 (30%)	55 (29%)	-.330	.742
TV	49 (60%)	51 (49%)	100 (54%)	-2.019	.043*
Travel agent	12 (15%)	15 (14%)	27 (14%)	-.067	.947
Internet	17 (21%)	28 (27%)	45 (24%)	-.741	.459
No. of Information sources				-.246	.805
One	44	53	97 (52%)		
Two	29	34	63 (34%)		
Three and more	9	14	23 (10%)		

\* Statistically significant at .05 level

No significant differences were identified between the pre- and post-visit groups in the sources of information used and the number of sources accessed, with the exception of TV which was indicated more frequently (at the .05 level,  $p=.043$ ) by the pre-visit sample.

#### 4.4 Motivations for Traveling to Tibet

Respondents' motivations for traveling to Tibet were measured by asking respondents to rate the importance of a number of reasons for visiting Tibet on a 5-point Likert scale (1 being very unimportant; 5 being very important). As no statistically significant differences were found between pre-visit and post-visit samples at the .05 level using

independent sample t-tests (Table 4.4.1), the two samples were combined into one in the analysis of motivations as shown in Table 4.4.1.

Table 4.4.1: Comparisons of the Motivations of Pre- and Post-visit Respondents

		N	Mean	S.D.	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Tibetan Culture	Pre-visit	82	4.10	.795	-1.351	.178
	Post-visit	104	4.27	.937		
Natural scenery	Pre-visit	82	4.45	.723	.163	.870
	Post-visit	104	4.43	.822		
Opening of the railway line	Pre-visit	82	4.02	.942	1.229	.221
	Post-visit	104	3.84	1.142		
Novelty of Tibet	Pre-visit	82	3.91	.971	.140	.889
	Post-visit	104	3.89	1.004		
Mysteriousness of Tibet	Pre-visit	82	4.22	.889	1.191	.235
	Post-visit	104	4.05	1.074		
Away from daily routine	Pre-visit	82	2.84	1.181	1.063	.289
	Post-visit	103	2.66	1.116		
Learning experience	Pre-visit	82	3.17	1.086	-.782	.435
	Post-visit	104	3.30	1.122		
Personal satisfaction / self-esteem	Pre-visit	82	2.96	1.105	-.045	.964
	Post-visit	104	2.97	1.258		

In Table 4.4.2, as discussed in Chapter two, in the questionnaire the first five motivations are examples of push factors; while the last three motivations are pull factors. The latter, are mainly attributes of the destination. As indicated in Table 4.4.2, the five motivations categorized as pull factors all received high ratings on importance, with “natural scenery” ranked first with mean score of 4.44, indicating respondents’ desire to see the natural attractions of Tibet. “Tibetan culture” received a mean score of 4.19, “mysteriousness of Tibet” scored 4.12, “Opening of the railway line” scored 3.92 and “novelty of Tibet” was ascribed 3.90 on a five-point Likert scale. Thus, all of these were important motivational factors. In contrast, push factors, such as “away from the daily routine” (Mean = 2.74), “a learning experience” (Mean = 3.24) and “personal satisfaction / self-esteem” (Mean = 2.97) were perceived to be much less important than the motivations categorized as pull factors. This indicates that for Tibet, pull factors play a much more important role in attracting tourists than push factors. However, the low significance of pull factors may be attributed to the fact that the questionnaire survey was conducted on train travelers who

had already overcome the socio-psychological barriers and made the decision to travel to Tibet. Thus, generalisability of the results might need further support, perhaps through interviewing potential travelers prior to their decision to visit Tibet. However, this was beyond the scope of this study.

Table 4.4.2: Analysis of Motivation of Traveling to Tibet

Motivation	No. of respondents					Mean	S.D.
	1 *	2 *	3 *	4 *	5 *		
Tibetan Culture a	5	1	24	79	77	4.19	.879
Natural scenery a	4	0	9	70	103	4.44	.778
Opening of the railway line a	6	18	22	79	61	3.92	1.060
Novelty of Tibet a	4	14	34	78	56	3.90	.987
Mysteriousness of Tibet a	4	13	19	70	80	4.12	.998
Away from daily routine b	20	73	45	29	18	2.74	1.146
Learning experience b	9	46	45	63	23	3.24	1.106
Personal satisfaction / self-esteem b	18	57	47	41	23	2.97	1.190

\* 1: very unimportant; 2: unimportant; 3: neutral; 4: important; 5: very important

<sup>a</sup> Pull factors

<sup>b</sup> Push factors

Independent Sample T-tests and One-way ANOVA tests were conducted to examine the between-group differences in motivations for traveling to Tibet among travelers with different demographic and socio-economic characteristics, such as education, monthly income, gender, age and origin. These attributes are commonly considered in the literature as factors influencing travel motivations. As people with only primary education constituted just 1 percent of the overall sample, this category was excluded from the examination of education. Therefore, differences between people with different education levels were only examined tested between those with high school education and those with university or above education. As shown in Table 4.4.3.1, no statistically significant differences at the .05 level were identified in respondents' motivations to visit Tibet among travelers from different demographic and socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, travelers to Tibet from different demographic and socio-economic backgrounds are generally similarly motivated in making the decision to travel to Tibet.

Respondents' perceptions of barriers of traveling to Tibet were measured by asking respondents to rate the importance of a number of barriers on a 5-point Likert scale (1 being very unimportant; 5 being very important). As no statistically significant difference at .05 level was found between pre-visit and post-visit samples using independent sample t-tests, the two samples were combined in the analysis as shown in Table 4.4.3.2.

Table 4.4.3.1: Motivation of Traveling to Tibet among Travelers with Different Demographic and Socio-economic Backgrounds

	Gender		Education		Income		Age		Origin	
	t	Sig.	t	Sig.	F	Sig.	F	Sig.	F	Sig.
Tibetan Culture	-.648	.519	.968	.334	.548	.700	1.217	.303	1.788	.118
Natural scenery	-1.100	.275	-.056	.956	.355	.841	1.850	.106	1.666	.146
Opening of the railway line	1.851	.068	.061	.951	.838	.503	1.585	.166	.341	.888
Novelty of Tibet	-.850	.398	.966	.335	.573	.683	1.206	.308	1.106	.359
Mysteriousness of Tibet	-.602	.549	.976	.331	.653	.626	.477	.793	.827	.533
Away from daily routine	.867	.389	.256	.798	.926	.450	.811	.543	1.668	.145
Leaning experience	-.228	.821	-.015	.988	.382	.821	.510	.769	.416	.837
Personal satisfaction / self-esteem	-1.902	.061	-.334	.739	.251	.909	.970	.438	.616	.687

Since the data were collected from travelers to Tibet who had already overcome the barriers to travel, it should not be surprising that none of the barriers were rated as particularly important. Mean scores clustered around the midpoint of 3 as shown in Table 4.4.3.3. However the relative importance of the barriers might be representative and indicative of those faced by the general population. Transportation or accessibility received the lowest mean score of 2.84, which indicates the increased accessibility after the opening of the railway line. Health issues (mean = 3.56) was the factor of most concern among tourists to Tibet.

The results indicate, at least for respondents, that with the new train service to Tibet, accessibility was no longer considered as the major restriction on Tibet tourism. Thus, improved accessibility is a major contribution of the Qinghai-Tibet railway. Now, with

accessibility solved for the train travelers, health concerns due to the high altitude geographical location of Tibet seems to be the top restriction or barrier for travelers to Tibet. If more information could be provided on the typical symptoms and measures to deal with the high altitude sickness, travelers might have higher confidence to visit Tibet.

Table 4.4.3.2: Comparison of Pre- and Post-visit Groups' Assessments of Barriers

		N	Mean	S.D.	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Distance	Pre-visit	80	3.13	.998	.598	.550
	Post-visit	103	3.03	1.167		
Duration	Pre-visit	80	3.13	.960	.180	.857
	Post-visit	103	3.10	1.133		
Harsh environment	Pre-visit	80	3.20	.986	-.025	.980
	Post-visit	103	3.20	1.123		
Transportation/Accessibility	Pre-visit	80	2.76	1.034	-.847	.398
	Post-visit	103	2.89	1.038		
Traveling cost	Pre-visit	80	3.25	1.000	.504	.615
	Post-visit	103	3.17	1.004		
Health concern	Pre-visit	80	3.49	1.125	-.757	.450
	Post-visit	103	3.61	1.069		

Table 4.4.3.3: Analysis of the Importance of Barriers of Traveling to Tibet

Barriers		Distance	Duration	Harsh environment	Transportation / Accessibility	High cost	Health concern
N	Valid	183	183	183	183	183	183
	Missing	4	4	4	4	4	4
Mean		3.07	3.11	3.20	2.84	3.21	3.56
S. D.		1.095	1.058	1.063	1.035	1.000	1.092
Importance	1	8	6	5	9	7	8
	2	64	60	54	79	41	26
	3	33	40	42	37	56	41
	4	63	62	63	49	65	72
	5	15	15	19	9	14	36

#### 4.5 Expectation and Satisfaction

Expectations and satisfactions were explored for six travel components: nature, culture, accommodation, food, activities and expenses. The mean differences for pre-visit expectations and post-visit satisfactions with the destination were examined using Independent Sample T-tests as shown in Table 4.5.1. No statistically significant

differences at the .05 level were found between expectations and satisfactions for the attributes of nature, culture and food. On a five-point Likert scale, the expectations for nature (mean= 4.43) and culture (mean= 4.00) at the destination were both extremely high, and the satisfaction scores for nature (mean= 4.37) and culture (mean= 4.01) show that the high expectations were actually met by the destination with its unique natural and cultural attractions.

For the destination attributes of accommodation, food, activities and expenses, with their prior trip information of the destination, travelers' expectation mean scores were around the midpoint of 3, which stands for average (Table 4.5.1). However, statistically significant differences were identified for accommodation, activities and expenses between the pre-visit expectations and post-visit satisfactions (Table 4.5.1). Activities and expenses had lower scores for satisfaction than expectations, whereas accommodation exceeded expectations. The satisfaction level of the post-visit group on accommodation (mean= 3.48) was slightly higher than the expectation score (mean= 3.23). However the satisfaction level with activities (mean=3.23) and expenses (mean= 2.87) were lower than the expectation level, likely indicating room for further improvement in these areas.

Table 4.5.1: Mean Differences between Pre-visit Expectation and Post-visit Satisfaction of Destination Experience in Tibet

	Pre-visit Expectation (n=82)		Post-visit Satisfaction (n=105)		Mean Diff.	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean <sup>a</sup>	S.D.	Mean <sup>b</sup>	S.D.			
Nature	4.43	.667	4.37	.697	.055	.552	.581
Culture	4.00	.846	4.01	.935	-.010	-.073	.942
Accommodation	3.23	.708	3.48	.761	-.244	-2.268	.025 *
Food	3.16	.693	3.10	.883	.063	.549	.584
Activities	3.55	.740	3.23	.869	.320	2.720	.007 *
Expenses	3.23	.742	2.87	.721	.365	3.379	.001 *

<sup>a</sup> Expectation scale: 1 = very low; 2 = low; 3 = average; 4 = high; 5 = very high.

<sup>b</sup> Satisfaction scale: 1 = very poor; 2 = poor; 3 = average; 4 = good; 5 = very good

\* Statistically significant at .05 level

#### 4.6 Respondents' Perceptions of the Train Journey

Respondents perception of the train journey were explored in the questionnaire survey, by asking for their reasons for choosing train as their mode of transportation to Tibet and assessing their satisfaction with the train journey. Again, a number of statements were provided and evaluations were elicited using 5-point Likert scales.

##### 4.6.1 Reasons for Choosing the Train

As shown in Table 4.6.1, the view from the train (mean= 4.17) was the most important attraction of the train journey. This indicates clearly that the train journey was an important reason for taking the train and was expected to be a positive part of the travel experience. This was followed by the indication that going by train could help travelers better adapt to the high altitude and reduce the physical discomfort of altitude sickness in Tibet (mean= 3.99). Safety, low price and relaxation were also scored quite high. Perhaps surprisingly as a new and somewhat unusual travel experience, novelty received the lowest score among the reasons offered to respondents for choosing to travel by train.

Table 4.6.1: Reason for Choosing the Train Journey to Tibet

		Novelty	Low Price	Safety	View	Adaptation	Relaxation
N	Valid	184	184	184	184	184	184
	Missing	3	3	3	3	3	3
Mean		2.56	3.34	3.65	4.17	3.99	3.13
S. D.		1.222	1.043	1.035	.838	.952	1.194
Importance*	1	40	3	5	2	2	13
	2	63	47	23	8	15	54
	3	31	42	43	15	27	40
	4	38	69	74	90	79	50
	5	12	23	39	69	61	27

\* Importance scale: 1 = very unimportant; 2 = unimportant; 3 = neutral; 4 = important; 5 = very important

##### 4.6.2 Satisfaction with the Train Journey

Satisfaction with the train journey was evaluated by asking respondents to rate their satisfaction with the duration, schedule, service, facilities, view and expenses of the train

journey on a 5-point Likert scale. A summary of the satisfaction scores for the combined sample is presented in Table 4.6.2.1.

Table 4.6.2.1: Satisfaction with the Train Journey of the Overall Sample

		Duration	Schedule	Service	Facility	View	Expenses
N	Valid	184	184	184	184	184	184
	Missing	3	3	3	3	3	3
Mean		2.98	3.62	3.58	3.72	<u>4.07</u>	3.32
S. D.		.923	.766	.826	.728	.736	.829
Importance	1	6	0	3	0	1	3
	2	54	15	16	14	4	22
	3	70	57	51	39	26	85
	4	46	95	99	115	104	62
	5	8	17	15	16	49	12

\* Importance scale: 1 = very unimportant; 2 = unimportant; 3 = neutral; 4 = important; 5 = very important

Table 4.6.2.2: Comparison of Pre- and Post-visit Satisfaction with the Train Journey

		N	Mean	S.D.	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Duration	Pre-visit	82	3.16	.838	2.443	.016*
	Post-visit	102	2.83	.966		
Schedule	Pre-visit	82	3.48	.773	-2.303	.022*
	Post-visit	102	3.74	.744		
Service	Pre-visit	82	3.35	.908	-3.363	.001*
	Post-visit	102	3.76	.706		
Facility	Pre-visit	82	3.55	.788	-2.908	.004*
	Post-visit	102	3.86	.645		
View	Pre-visit	82	3.87	.766	-3.339	.001*
	Post-visit	102	4.23	.673		
Expenses	Pre-visit	82	3.32	.844	.027	.978
	Post-visit	102	3.31	.820		

\* Statistically significant at .05 level

In terms of the reasons for choosing to travel by train, respondents' satisfaction levels were generally positive with mean scores between 3 and 4 as follows: schedule (mean=3.62), service (mean=3.58), the facility (mean=3.72) and the price (mean=3.32). Most respondents were not satisfied with the duration of the train journey (Mean=2.98)



although it is inevitable that the journey by train is a long one. The view from the train received the highest mean score at 4.17.

Table 4.6.2.2 compares the satisfaction scores of the pre- and post-visit travelers for the train journey. Statistically significant differences were found for duration, schedule, service, facility and view, but not for expenses. The higher satisfaction level (mean= 4.23) on the views from the train received on the return journey compared with the pre-visit one (Mean= 3.87) might have been due to the fact that the most impressive views of the Tibetan plateau were seen at the start of the return journey. On the other hand, on the journey from Beijing to Lhasa, the most attractive views were seen at the end of the journey, after some respondents had completed their questionnaires. With the exception of the duration of the journey, which was scored lower by post-visit travelers, mean scores were higher for schedule, service and facility on the return journey. As a traveler in both directions, I experienced differences in the services on the train between the two journeys. The atmosphere on the return journey was more relaxed because the train staffs were more easygoing and willing to chat with passengers. Although the facilities were basically the same, higher service level may have also increased the satisfaction with the facilities and the schedule.

#### 4.6.3 Importance of the Train Journey

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the seven and eight statements on the train journey presented in the pre- and post-visit questionnaires respectively. No statistically significant differences were identified between the pre- and post-visit samples using Independent Sample T-tests (Table 4.6.3); therefore the pre- and post-visit samples were combined into one in the analysis of the importance of the train journey.

Among the sample of 187 respondents, the majority of respondents (N=142) agree or strongly agree that the train journey is an important part of the overall travel experience and are generally satisfied with the train journey (N=143). Compared with other modes of transportation, 149 respondents agree or strongly agree that train is preferable to the bus

when traveling to Tibet, while 106 respondents prefer the train over air travel. More than half (52%) of respondents agree or strongly agree that if there was no train, they would not have visited Tibet. This indicates the great importance of the train to Tibet tourism. However, as the questionnaire survey was distributed only to passengers on the train, it is not possible to apply this statistic to the broad market for travel to Tibet. All respondents had actually chosen the train as their means of transportation to or from Tibet, already indicating their preference for train travel over other modes of transportation.

Table 4.6.3: Importance of the Train Journey

	1*	2*	3*	4*	5*	t-score	Sig. (2-tailed)
The train journey is comfortable.	2	5	60	98	19	-1.556	.121
I do not feel bored during the train journey	5	35	50	81	13	-1.359	.176
I am satisfied with the train journey in general.	2	3	36	128	15	-.762	.447
I prefer train over air as the mode of transportation to Tibet.	6	22	49	84	22	1.452	.148
I prefer train over bus as the mode of transportation to Tibet.	3	9	22	105	44	.567	.571
The train journey is an important part of my travel experience to Tibet.	2	7	32	108	34	.184	.854
The train journey experience is equally important as the destination experience in Tibet. **	7	17	20	46	12		
If there were no train, I would not visit Tibet.	13	38	34	76	22	.798	.426

\* 1: strongly disagree; 2: disagree; 3: neither agree nor disagree; 4: agree; 5: strongly agree

\*\* The question only for the return journey from Lhasa to Beijing

When comparing the train journey with the destination experience in Tibet, 58 out of 105 (55%) respondents agree or strongly agree that the train journey is equally important as the destination experience in Tibet. However, when rating the best part of the whole trip, among 102 valid answers, 87 respondents (85%) considered the destination experience as the best part, and 15 (15%) voted for the train journey. Therefore, it can be inferred that when traveling to Tibet, the train journey is without doubt an important part in the overall travel experience; nonetheless, the destination, as the objective of the journey, is most important to tourists. Therefore, although the Qinghai-Tibet train has better facilities than

other trains in China and a route designed for tourism, the quality of the destination is still vital to its success.

#### 4.7 Suggestions for Enhancing Tibet Tourism and the Train Journey

Suggestions concerning the train journey, tourism development and the tourism products of Tibet were solicited in an open-question format in the post-visit questionnaire. This was done in order to better understand respondents' travel experiences in Tibet, the problems that they encountered and their ideas for improvement of their vacation experience, both en route and at the destination. Among 105 respondents, the number of answers acquired and the response rate for each question are shown in Table 4.7.1.

Table 4.7.1 Number of Suggestions Collected in the Post-visit Questionnaire

	No. of answers	Responding rate
Suggestions to:		
The train journey to Tibet	38	36%
Tourism development of Tibet	34	32%
Tibet tourism products	26	25%
Others	25	24%

##### 4.7.1 Suggestions Concerning the Train Journey

With respect to suggestions concerning the train journey, 19 out of 38 answers pointed out that the duration of the train journey was too long. However, there are limitations to what can be done about this. Another 5 suggested that there should be more programs or activities for passengers on the train, such as more on-board broadcasting introducing the landscapes along the railway line, or more sightseeing stops for passengers to take a break and enjoy the views. These appear to be feasible suggestions. It is evident that sometimes some passengers felt bored during the journey. To the statement "I do not feel bored during the train journey", only 17 disagreed and 4 strongly disagreed with the statement, which in total constituted only 21 percent of all respondents.

My observations during the train journey focused on how travelers spend their time on board. I noticed that during the day, most passengers spent their time chatting with fellow travelers, enjoying the views along the railway line, and sleeping or relaxing in beds.

Despite the fact that the views in the Qinghai-Tibet section are unique and impressive and the train schedule is designed to permit viewing this section during daylight hours, the 15 hours journey between Golmud and Lhasa is only about half the total daytime for the whole train journey. Therefore, the long hours on the train without much to do are the major issue that bothers passengers during the train journey.

In spite of the above issue, the train journey was generally considered to be good with 7 respondents expressing their satisfaction with the train journey in the open-ended question. Other minor issues include the difficulty in getting the train tickets (2 respondents), the need for a non-smoking car (2 respondents); and 1 respondent was concerned about the safety of passengers' belongings.

#### 4.7.2 Suggestions for Tourism Development in Tibet

For the development of Tibet tourism, 10 out of 34 respondents suggested standardizing the management and operation of the tourism market. This was also mentioned by 9 respondents in their suggestions based on their unpleasant experience at the destination. The issues were begging, overcharging, and pushy or deceptive selling. Regulating the prices of service providers and the preservation of the environment and local culture were also each mentioned by 7 respondents.

As an observer, I also noticed that the tourism market was not well regulated and it was not easy to find a reliable tour operator offering value-for-money products. For example, the price for a 2-day local tour to Nyingchi quoted by different tour operators varied from RMB 250 to 550 (roughly CAD \$35 to 80) without major differences in the actual product, which was confusing and unpleasant to tourists. Car rental services were often recommended by word-of-mouth referrals instead of through more usual information or advertising platforms, indicating the lack of trust in advertising by travelers to Tibet.

A better route or tour program design was raised by 3 respondents. They felt that this is important because many of the interesting places are far apart as shown in Figure 4.7.2. As a result, the time spent en route was much longer than the time available at the

destinations. Furthermore, improving the professionalism of tour guides, the transportation in the city of Lhasa, and putting more emphasis on local characteristics were each raised as being important by 2 respondents. Although there is room for improvement, the promising future of Tibet tourism was pointed out by 4 respondents.

#### 4.7.3 Suggestions Concerning Tourism Products in Tibet

When commenting on the tourism products in Tibet, the major concern is the high price with 13 out of 26 respondents raising this point. Developing tourism products with Tibetan characteristics and improving the quality and the diversity of tourism products were also each suggested by 3 respondents.

#### 4.7.4 Suggestions Specifically from International Travelers

All of the eight international travelers to Tibet surveyed in this study pointed out the problem of getting a permit to visit Tibet. They suggested that the application procedure should be simplified and the expenses should be reduced. Acquiring a permit is a barrier for international tourists who wish to travel to Tibet. Even for those who had already overcome this barrier, it was considered to be an important issue to be raised. In addition, higher quality of English-speaking tour guide, the provision of travel information in English during the train journey and at the destination, and fewer restrictions on international tourists were desired.

### 4.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the major results of qualitative and quantitative analyses of information derived from the questionnaire survey administered on the train and the researcher's observations both on the train and at the destination of Tibet.

The demographic and socio-economic profile of the respondents, their travel behaviour pattern, and their motivations for traveling to Tibet were examined by combining the pre- and post-visit samples into one because no statistically significant between-group difference were identified for these variables. The differences between expectations and satisfactions with the destination, the respondents' perceptions of and satisfaction with the train journey

were compared between pre-visit and post-visit samples. Respondents' suggestions regarding the train journey, and the tourism development and tourism products of Tibet were analyzed using the responses to open-ended questions and summarized in combination with the researcher's observation in the field.



Figure 4.7.2 Tourism Spots Map of Tibet



(Source: <http://www.accesstibettour.com/tibet-map.html>)

## **5. Discussion:**

This chapter discusses the practical and academic implications of the research. Practical implications of this study are discussed in terms of the train journey, destination development of Tibet and the marketing of Tibet tourism. Academic implications include the comparison of this study with previous literature on Tibet tourism, the application of the proposed destination choice framework and the relative importance of the train journey to the destination.

### **5.1 Practical Implications**

#### **5.1.1 The Train Journey**

Results of the study show that the view along the railway was the most important attraction of the train journey to Tibet, followed by the fact that going by train could help travelers better adapt to the high altitude situation and alleviate the physical discomfort of altitude sickness in Tibet.

Travelers surveyed in this study consistently had high satisfaction with the view along the railway and were generally satisfied with the schedule, facilities, services and expenses of the train journey, indicating that the train journey to Tibet meets traveler' general needs and requirements.

Lower satisfaction with the duration of the train journey, the indication of feeling bored during the train journey identified in the study, consistent with respondents' suggestions on improving the train journey, show that the long hours spent en route are the most important issue to be addressed in terms of the train service to Tibet.

The train in service on the Qinghai-Tibet railway is the most advanced in China. According to Zhang Shuguang, director of the Transportation Bureau with China's Ministry of Railways, the Beijing-Lhasa train runs at a speed of 160 km per hour on the plain but, restricted by the high altitude geographical condition, it slows down to 120 km



per hour when it reaches the Qinghai-Tibet section (People's Daily, 2005.12.12). The possibility to shorten the duration of the overall train journey is limited technically.

Therefore, it is important to develop more activities or programs for train travelers so that they can have several alternatives to spend their time on the train instead of feeling bored. Onboard broadcasting introducing cities, sightseeing spots and landscape along the railway line is considered to be potentially important by travelers on the train. Also, a detailed route guide could be developed, explaining physical (such as geology) and cultural (such as architecture, land use and settlement patterns) en route so that travelers can follow these if they wish. In addition, more sightseeing stops along the railway, especially in the Qinghai-Tibet section of the railway between Golmud and Lhasa, could be developed, allowing tourists to take a break during the long journey and enjoy the unique landscape of the Tibetan Plateau.

#### 5.1.2 Destination Development of Tibet

Implications of this study to destination development of Tibet are discussed in the following areas: standardization of the tourism market; development of tourism facilities and infrastructure; local tour design and operation; characteristic Tibetan tourism products and alleviation of restrictions on international travelers.

##### 5.1.2.1 Standardization of the Tourism Supply

Travelers' satisfaction with destination attributes such as accommodation, food, activities and expenses were around the average level despite cautious expectations based on prior trip information on the destination. Most travelers understand that the development of basic tourism facilities is just at an early stage and has been restricted by the remote geographical location and economic situation in Tibet. Further improvements are needed in order to provide a better travel destination environment for visitors.

Standardization and regulation of the management and operation of the tourism market were suggested by respondents in this study as important in Tibet tourism development. The unpleasant experience raised by respondents at the destination, such as begging,

overcharging, and pushy or deceptive selling, indicates that the tourism market in Tibet is still not well regulated or managed, and there are many areas in tourism operation and supervision that could be better developed. Standardization of the tourism market includes regulating the price of tourism products and services, maintaining a safe, reliable and friendly travel environment for travelers, and providing a reliable and convenient travel information distribution platform. As pointed out in *Report on Tibet Tourism Development (People's Daily, 2006.12.12)*, local laws and regulations should be released to enhance the management of the tourism industry and to ensure a healthy development of Tibet tourism.

#### 5.2.2.2 Development of Tourism Facilities and Infrastructure

Major tourism facilities evaluated in this study include accommodation and transportation. Accommodation used to be the weak point of Tibet tourism, but recent development has improved the capacity of accommodations, which is now capable of meeting up the needs of travelers in terms of number of rooms. However, because of the new status in development and the lack of management experience and expertise, the service and management standard lags the improved status of the facilities (Xinhua, 2007.4.5). *Report on Tibet Tourism Development (People Daily, 2006.12.12)* pointed out that bringing in and training hotel management expertise has become an urgent and important issue in accordance with the fast development of Tibet tourism (People Daily, 2006.12.12).

This study shows that travelers' expectation of accommodation in Tibet was around the mid-point on the Likert scale based on their pre-trip information. Although the satisfaction with accommodation was still around this level, it is slightly above the expectation level, which may reflect the improvements in the current status of accommodation.

Besides the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway and increased train services from major cities of China to Lhasa, there are 11 flight routes from Lhasa airport, several major roads connecting Tibet with the neighboring provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan, and

even neighboring countries. According to the *Report on Tibet Tourism Development* (People's Daily, 2006.12.12), Tibet is no longer isolated but well-connected by various transportation means. This is supported by the findings of this study in that the majority of respondents did not consider transportation as a barrier for traveling to Tibet.

However, the need for improvement of local transportation in the city of Lhasa was identified in this study and it is an issue identified by the government of Lhasa. According to Xinhua news, continuing to increase the local transportation resources and capability is already listed in the government plan (Xinhua, 2007.4.5).

In addition, Tibetan food has distinctive features resulting from both the ethnic culture and the high altitude natural environment, which is attractive to travelers. Characteristic Tibetan food such as Zanba (roasted highland barley flour), buttered tea and sweet tea are the daily food for Tibetan people.

Food is considered as part of the Chinese culture, and tasting characteristic and authentic local foods is one of the attractions for most travelers. However, the authentic Tibetan food was seldom promoted as a tourism attraction. As noticed by the researcher, the number of restaurants offering Chinese food from elsewhere surpasses the number of Tibetan restaurants in Lhasa. Meanwhile, there are many local tea houses along the street in Lhasa, usually comfortably decorated in traditional Tibetan style, offering traditional buttered tea and sweet tea. Having tea together with family or friends at the tea house in the afternoon is considered as a custom by local Tibetan residents. Traditional Tibetan food is also considered as being helpful for people to adapt to the high altitude environment. Therefore, the potential of promoting Tibetan food and beverages could be another opportunity in terms of tourism development. Tibetan food and beverages, if better presented or packaged, could be promoted and developed as one of the tourism attractions and feature products of Tibet.

#### 5.2.2.3 Local Tour Design and Operation

One character of Tibet tourism is that tourism attractions are widely dispersed and the road condition is restricted by the high altitude geographical location. Better tour route design was identified as important to maximize the effectiveness of time spent en route. The researcher also noticed the lack of diversity in the tourism supply, as most tour programs offered by different travel agents are almost identical in the market.

Three areas are identified as the major directions proposed for developing Tibet tourism programs in *Report on Tibet Tourism Development* (People's Daily, 2006.12.12) and the article of *Lhasa is now becoming the most attractive city in Western China* (Xinhua, 2006.3.8). The first is developing cultural tourism programs in Tibet with the Buddhist temples, monuments and other architecture; the second focuses on the unique natural high altitude landscape in the Tibetan Plateau; and the third is developing ethnic tourism programs emphasizing representative Tibetan ethnic traditions in the areas of the life style, food, artifacts, singing and dancing. These proposed directions for Tibet tourism development were supported by the findings of this study, illustrating the requirements of travelers for tourism programs or activities infused with Tibetan cultural and ethnic characteristics, time efficiency gains from better route design, and at a reasonable price. Furthermore, improving the professionalism of tour guides was identified by this study as another area to improve service quality in the tourism sector: respondents expressed concern at the huge variation in the quality of local tour guides and, also, the need for urgent improvements was stressed by Mr. Luosang, delegate of National People's Congress from Lhasa (Xinhua, 2007.3.3).

#### 5.2.2.4 Characteristic Tibetan Tourism Products

Tibetan artifacts, jewelry and ornaments, and medicine have distinctive local characteristics and artistic value. Thus they are popular among travelers to Tibet. Travelers to Tibet usually would like to purchase some to bring back either as gifts or in memory of the trip. Therefore there is a huge potential market to be developed for local products. The street around Jokhang Temple is developed as the major tourism market in the city of Lhasa, where there are many stores and booths selling a wide diversity of goods. However the quality and price of goods sold vary widely. When commenting on the tourism products in Tibet, the major

concern of travelers is the price. Without proper knowledge of the quality and the value of local products, it is difficult for travelers to judge the price of the goods being sold. In this context, regulation and management to ensure the reliability of local sellers becomes more important.

Based on the findings, suggestions for local government are provided. First, information on the price range and tips for judging the quality of the unique products of Tibet could be provided for travelers. It would be important to set up, operate and advertise an effective evaluation system and a fair mechanism of reward and punishment for tourism stores or sellers, giving credits or certificates to stores or sellers selling characteristic products with good quality at reasonable price. Reliable retailing stores satisfying the evaluation criteria could also be supported by the government in tourism advertising as model stores. The selling success of those model stores could encourage and attract other stores to follow the evaluation system. Examples could be taken from Hong Kong, where a high quality symbol is given to stores meeting the standards set by the tourism board of Hong Kong. The evaluation system and the high quality symbol are advertised so that tourists to Hong Kong know that they can shop with confidence at stores with that symbol. Besides the improvement in the reliability of local products and stores, developing tourism products with distinctive Tibetan characteristics and an increase in the diversity of the available tourism products also require attention.

#### 5.2.2.5 Alleviate Restrictions on International Travelers

All international travelers to Tibet surveyed in this study pointed out the problem of getting a permit to travel to Tibet, including the complicated application procedures, the time required and the application fee. Although the respondents are those who had already overcome the difficulty, they all considered it as an important issue to be raised, which indicates that getting the permit is a substantial barrier for international tourists desiring to travel to Tibet. Also as stated in the *Report on Tibet Tourism Development* (People's Daily, 2006.12.12), there are three major barriers to international travel to Tibet: transportation, procedures to get into Tibet, and the overemphasis on the harsh natural environment in Tibet in the media. Both *Report on Tibet Tourism Development* (People Daily, 2006.12.12) and the international

travelers surveyed suggested that the application procedure should be simplified, the time required be shortened and the expenses be reduced. In addition, the advertisement of Tibet tourism should provide a broad view of Tibet.

More is still needed in order to alleviate the language barrier for international travelers in Tibet. Measures should be taken in improving the quality of English-speaking tour guides, and providing English travel information during the train journey and at the destination.

### 5.1.3 Tourism Marketing of Tibet

This study collected the basic information on actual train travelers, their travel behaviour pattern, and their perceptions of Tibet tourism. Therefore, implications and suggestions are derived for Tibet tourism marketing based on that.

As argued by Wang (2006), traveling to Tibet generally requires longer time and higher expenses than other destinations; and the unique cultural and natural features of Tibet are more attractive to experienced tourists with a higher education level; furthermore, the high altitude geographical location of Tibet requires good physical health. By studying the actual train travelers to Tibet, a picture of those travelers was presented. In terms of the demographics and socio-economic characteristics, this study suggests tourists to Tibet are from a diversified age group with more males than females. Major career categories include employees of companies, government or other institutions, self-employed, students and retired people. High education level and higher than average monthly income was identified among tourists to Tibet as well.

TV was identified as the most important information source for Tibet tourism with more than half respondents using it. Newspapers and magazines and word of mouth referrals are still considered important information sources by travelers to Tibet. Internet is an important source of information, though not surpassing the traditional ones. However, with the increasing use of internet, internet should become more important as an information channel for potential tourists to Tibet from a higher education level.

As discussed in Chapter four, a small percentage of respondents were getting travel information from travel agencies. The low utility level of travel agencies as an information source may be due to the fact that the majority of travelers prefer self-arranged travel with more flexibility and self control instead of joining tour groups. As pointed out by Wall (2006, p32), newly emerging tourists are more experienced and discerning travel product purchasers, seeking new experiences; being more independent, and, as such, they need more control of their travel decisions and require more individuality and specialization, and less rigidity in travel products. Travelers to Tibet could be considered as newly emerging tourists in this sense. Therefore, improvements are needed in the future operation of travel agencies to provide more informative and reliable services and more diversified, flexible and customized travel products to satisfy tourists' more sophisticated and individualized needs for travel. In addition, the active distribution of information on travel products and their promotion to potential travelers through effective media channels should also be emphasized.

As illustrated in Chapter four, the majority of travelers were dependent on only one source of information. Therefore it is crucial to identify effective information distribution platforms for the distribution of travel information to potential travelers.

Based on the information of the profile of actual travelers to Tibet and their behavior pattern, suggestions on marketing channel selection are generated. In terms of media channel selection, TV should be the first choice as the major mass media channel target almost everyone, with a wide range in age, career and location. In addition, more media support in popular or travel newspapers and magazines should be designed along with TV advertisement. Moreover, internet with its wide accessibility and convenience should be paid attention to as a booming information platform preferable to audiences with a higher education level and relatively younger age groups, which coincide with the travelers' profile to Tibet.

The study indicates that for train travelers to Tibet, pull factors are the major travel motivating factors. The natural and cultural attractions were identified as the core motivations for train travelers to Tibet. As a relatively new destination compared with

many destinations in China and all over the world, Tibet is still considered as mysterious, which is another important motivation to travelers seeking new experiences. Opening of the new railway line is also important. Therefore, based on the major motivations of train travelers to Tibet identified in this study, the design and content of the marketing materials promoting the train journey and Tibet should emphasize the natural and cultural attractions at the destination, and the mysteriousness and novelty of experience travelers might get during the train journey as well as at the destination.

## 5.2 Academic Implications

### 5.2.1 Comparison with the Literature

The major research on Tibet tourism development after the opening of The Qinghai-Tibet railway identified was Wang's research in 2006 titled Tibet tourism after the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, which provides a conceptual reference for Tibet tourism development. Specifically targeting train travelers to Tibet, findings of this study were consistent in terms of travelers' profile and travel behaviour patterns with Wang's (2006) research based on a general questionnaire survey of residents of five major cities in China.

With respect to the profile of the respondents, Wang (2006) summarized that traveling to Tibet requires a long time and involves high expenses; moreover, the unique cultural and natural features of Tibet may be more attractive to experienced tourists with a higher education level. In addition, good physical health is required by the high altitude geographical location of Tibet. Therefore, tourists to Tibet are generally people with a high education level, high income, high consumption level and comparatively good health (Wang, 2006). Similarities were identified in Chapter four between the sample drawn in this study and the sample from the five-city survey in Wang's research (2006). Findings of this study indicated that train travelers to Tibet are from diverse age groups and employment categories, with perhaps slightly more males than females. Generally high education levels and higher than average monthly incomes were also identified as consistent with Wang's research findings (2006).



Based on the location of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, Wang (2006) also predicted that people from the northwest, northeast and central northern provinces of China would benefit more from the train service. The results of this study show that the majority of train travelers are Chinese with 80 percent of respondents from northern China. Among them, travelers from Beijing and Tianjin; northwest provinces, central northern provinces and northeast provinces constitute important percentages. However, the small number of travelers from south China identified in this sample may be because the train route surveyed was from Beijing to Lhasa, which is not the priority choice for people from the south who are more likely to take the train to Lhasa from Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu or Chongqing.

In addition, travelers' travel behavior patterns were examined and compared with Wang's research (2006) based on the data drawn from the five-city survey conducted in 2003. In this study, the predominant majority of respondents were traveling to Tibet for the first time, which shows that Tibet is still a new tourism destination to most travelers. This finding is supported by Wang's study showing that very few people in China have been to Tibet, but the majority of them wish to go, which indicates the large potential market for Tibet tourism (Wang, 2006). Moreover, the mean length of stay in the overall sample in this study is 6.4 days, which is 1.4 days shorter than the 7.8 days identified in Wang's research (2006) based on the five-city survey in 2003. One possible reason might be the increased accessibility brought by the train service actually shortens the time spent in Tibet.

In terms of the trip expenses, 35 percent of respondents in this study reported their trip expenses between RMB3,500 and 5,000. The average total trip expenses to Tibet of RMB 4,231 as pointed out in Wang's research (2006) actually falls into this most common expense category identified in this study. Furthermore, as examined in Chapter four, the distribution of trip expenses in this study is similar to the data drawn from Wang's (2006) research. It can be concluded that the total trip expenses to Tibet before and after the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway have a similar distribution pattern. Although there are not many changes in the amount of the overall trip expenses in the two surveys, if considering the economic growth in China represented by the annual GDP growth exceeding 9 percent from 2004 to 2006, and

the increase of affordability of Chinese people between 2003 and 2007, the actual travel expenses to Tibet could be considered as being reduced.

In general, similarities are identified in terms of the travelers' profile and their behaviour pattern between the five-city survey in 2003 and this study conducted in 2007, which indicates the consistency in the profile and behaviour of Tibet travelers throughout recent years.

### 5.2.2 Application of the Destination Choice Framework

Based on previous literature as cited in Chapter two, the destination choice framework was developed and applied in this study. At the survey and questionnaire design stage, the structure and contents of the questionnaire were designed with the guidance of the destination choice framework. In addition, factors influencing travelers' destination choice in the framework were incorporated into the questions and answer choices provided in the questionnaire survey, including travelers' demographic and socio-economic characteristics, travel motivation with pull and push factors, travel experience, familiarity with the destination, and expectations and satisfactions with the destination. Especially, the pre- and post-visit en-route survey design facilitated the data collection of travelers' expectations and satisfactions with the destination for further comparison and analysis.

The destination choice framework also guided the data analysis process in this study, in terms of evaluating the individual contribution of each influencing factor in the travel decision making process, comparing the importance of each factor and analyzing the inter-relations between different influencing factors in the case of Tibet tourism. Based on the analysis, deeper understanding of travelers' destination choice of Tibet was achieved and practical implications for tourism marketing and operation were generated.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the destination choice framework that was developed based on previous literature is a useful tool in evaluating traveler's destination selection process, and could be applied in other cases and provide guidance in future tourism development.

### 5.2.3 Relative Importance of the Train Journey to the Destination

As reviewed in Chapter two, transport is one of the three functional components of tourism, and it forms an integral part of the overall travel experience. Although there are special cases such as cruise or scenic train journeys where the journey itself is the major travel experience, transport is generally considered as a passive element and not comparable with the destination attributes within the overall travel experience. Therefore, limited research has been concentrated on the importance of the transportation experience in tourism, especially in comparison with the destination experience.

Using the pre- and post-visit questionnaire survey design, questions and statements concerning the importance of the train journey and comparison of the train journey and the destination experience were asked from different perspective in this study. The relative importance of the Qinghai-Tibet train journey in comparison with the destination experience in Tibet was quantitatively analyzed from travelers' perspectives.

The results of this study show that general satisfaction with the train journey is high. The train journey was considered to be an important part of the overall travel experience by the majority of respondents. More than half of respondents agree that if there was no train, they would not visit Tibet. These findings consistently illustrate the great importance of the train to Tibet tourism. When comparing the train journey with the destination experience in Tibet, about half respondents agree that the train journey is equally important as the destination experience in Tibet. However, 85 percent respondents considered the destination experience to be the best part in the trip.

In addition, it is found that the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway also boosted the air transportation to Tibet. Therefore it could be inferred that the provision of the train service to Tibet increased the demand of traveling to Tibet, which benefited both the train and air transportation and increased the actual number of travelers to Tibet.

It should be noted that the questionnaire survey was distributed only to passengers on the train. By making the trip, the respondents had already overcome the barriers of traveling

to Tibet. And by choosing the train as their means of transportation to or from Tibet, they already indicated their preference for train travel over other modes of transportation. Therefore it is not possible to apply the results, especially particular statistics, to the broad market for travel to Tibet, although it is likely that the broader conclusions hold.

In summary, it can be concluded that when traveling to Tibet, the Qinghai-Tibet train, with its better facilities than other trains in China and a route designed for tourism, is without doubt an important part in the overall travel experience. Nonetheless, the quality of the destination, as the objective of the journey, is still vital to the success of the train journey in terms of its tourism use.

After the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway, tourism in Tibet experienced a marked increase and it is likely to continue to increase, for good or ill. In order to understand tourism issues and to achieve sustainable development in the region, it is necessary to study the impacts of tourism on Tibet from economic, social, cultural and environmental perspectives. Thus, the positive impacts could be identified and encouraged; and negative impacts could be controlled and managed. It is important to strive to preserve the natural environment, local culture, tradition and religion. Also it will be necessary to understand, balance and manage the impacts to different stakeholders at the destination. This study examined Tibet tourism only from train travelers' perspectives. Nevertheless, both the practical and academic implications that have been discussed in this Chapter deepen the understanding of current tourism development and tourism impacts in Tibet.

## **6. Conclusion:**

This chapter reviews the purpose of the research and summarizes the major findings of the study. Contributions of the study are then discussed and opportunities for future research revealed by this study are also presented.

### **6.1 Purpose of the Research**

Possessing among the most distinguished natural and cultural tourism resources, Tibet is undoubtedly a desirable travel destination to people from all over the world. A significant increase in tourism to Tibet occurred after the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in July 2006, because of the increased accessibility and affordability gained through the train services provided from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu and Chongqing to Lhasa.

This study identified and evaluated the impacts of the increased accessibility achieved by the Qinghai-Tibet railway on tourists' travel decisions to visit and experience of Tibet, and the importance of the railway in the overall travel experience. The research focused on train travelers to Tibet on the train between Beijing and Lhasa. A self-administered questionnaire on the train between Beijing and Lhasa and researcher's observation both on the train and at the destination were chosen as the major primary data collection methods in this study.

### **6.2 Major Findings**

Major findings of the research are listed by briefly answering the five research questions proposed in Chapter one.

First, the major destination influencing factors of Tibet tourism were identified, and the importance of those factors in terms of their influence on tourists' destination choice of Tibet were also evaluated. No difference was identified in travel motivations to Tibet among travelers from different demographic and socio-economic backgrounds, such as education, monthly income, gender, age and origin. Therefore, it can be inferred that

travelers to Tibet from different demographic and socio-economic backgrounds were generally motivated in a similar way in making the travel decision to Tibet.

Furthermore, the results in Chapter four show that among the pull factors, natural scenery and culture in Tibet were identified as the most important reasons for travelers to visit Tibet. Mysteriousness and the novelty of Tibet were highly rated as important reasons for visiting, indicating that Tibet is still a new tourism destination. Another important factor is the opening of the railway line, which increased the accessibility and the affordability of traveling to Tibet, and is also an attraction in its own right. In contrast, motivations categorized as push factors, such as “Away from daily routine”, “Learning experience” and “Personal satisfaction / self-esteem” were perceived as being significantly less important than the other five motivations categorized as pull factors. This might be partially due to the fact that the respondents of the questionnaire survey had already overcome the socio-psychological barriers and made the trip to Tibet. However, the important motivational effects of pull factors in Tibet tourism could also have practical implications for tourism marketing of Tibet as a destination.

Second, the influence of the opening of the railway line to Lhasa on tourists’ destination choice of Tibet was discussed in the study. As shown in Chapter four, about half of the respondents agree that if there were no train, they would not have come to Tibet. It infers the availability of the train service to Tibet was an influential factor in making their travel decision to visit Tibet. As stated in *Report on Tibet Tourism Development* (CNTA, 2006.6.21), with the provision of the train service, the number of potential travelers with the economic capability of traveling to Tibet would increase to millions. Furthermore, the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in July 2006 also boosted air transportation to Tibet with continuous increase in total number of travelers to Tibet achieved afterwards.

Third, the relative importance of the train journey to the destination in the tourist travel experience of Tibet was explored in this study. In order to understand the importance of the train journey in the overall travel experience of Tibet, reasons for choosing the train journey, the satisfaction with the train journey and the level of agreement on the

importance of the train journey were included in the questionnaire survey. As discussed in Chapter four, the results show that the view along the railway was perceived as the most important attraction of the train journey, followed by the fact that going by train could help travelers better adapt to the high altitude and reduce the physical discomfort of altitude sickness in Tibet. Furthermore, the majority of respondents agreed that the train journey was an important part of the overall travel experience and were generally satisfied with the train journey. Although half of the respondents who participated in the post-visit questionnaire survey agree that the train journey was equally important as the destination experience in Tibet, 85 percent of respondents considered the destination experience as the best part. Therefore, it can be concluded that although the importance of the train journey to Tibet tourism is perceived as high, nonetheless, the destination of Tibet is still the vital determinant for the success of the train journey.

Fourth, the expectations and satisfactions of train travelers to Tibet were analyzed and compared. The results show that travelers to Tibet have high expectations regarding the natural and cultural attractions of Tibet, and the high expectation were actually met by the destination with its unique natural and cultural attractions, which proves the high quality of the basic tourism resources in Tibet. For destination attributes such as accommodation, food, activities and expenses, with their prior trip information on the destination, travelers reserved their expectation around the average level. In response, the satisfaction level of the post-visit sample was also around the average level, indicating room for further improvements in these areas at the destination.

Finally, practical implications and suggestions for improving the train journey experience to Tibet, the destination experience in Tibet, and tourism destination marketing of Tibet were discussed based on the findings of this study.

## 6.2 Contribution of the study

Undoubtedly, the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railway has had a great impact on the economic development of Tibet, especially from the tourism perspective. However, most of the literature measuring the importance and impacts of the railway has been undertaken from

a macro-perspective with a focus on the number of visitors and revenue generated. Limited research focuses on actual travelers' perceptions of Tibet tourism and no other research so far focuses on the train journey to Tibet in terms of its relative importance in comparison with the destination from actual travelers' perspective. That is the focus of this study and why it was designed and conducted. In addition, the survey design facilitated the data collection from both pre- and post-visit traveler groups, which was critical in comparing the similarities and differences between the two groups. Based on the comparison, the influences of the destination experience on travelers' perceptions of the trip were also identified.

Through the self-administered questionnaire survey on the train, train travelers' motivations for visiting Tibet and choosing the train journey were evaluated, their expectations and satisfactions with the destination were compared, and their perceptions of the importance of the train journey were ascertained. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the primary data collected from actual train travelers to Tibet provides useful information to understand who the travelers are, their travel behaviour and their needs and requirements when traveling to and in Tibet. Suggestions for improving the train journey experience and the destination experience, and Tibet tourism management and marketing were discussed based on the findings of the analysis.

Furthermore, a destination choice framework was proposed based on previous literature and was presented in Chapter two. Being applied in this case study of Tibet tourism, the framework proved to be a useful tool in understanding travelers' destination choice, which could also be used in tourism studies elsewhere.

### 6.3 Future research opportunities

Based on this study, several possible future research opportunities are identified from various perspectives to further understand Tibet tourism development and provide more valid and practical inputs in the future planning, development and management of Tibet tourism.



First, as this study focused on train travelers to Tibet, excluding opinions of people traveling via other transportation, future research could be conducted on travelers to Tibet via other means of transportation, especially via air, in order to get a more conceptual view of traveler's perceptions and opinions on Tibet tourism.

Second, this study was developed based on a one-time questionnaire survey of 187 respondents in total, which was restricted by the travel time and train route selected for the study. Therefore, more questionnaire surveys could be conducted at different times of the year during the peak and non-peak seasons and on different train routes to Lhasa, if time and funds permit, which could minimize the bias of a single survey and facilitate comparisons between peak and non-peak seasons, and people from different geographical origins taking different train routes. Thus more conceptual results could be achieved and practical suggestions on Tibet tourism development could be derived with more confidence.

Third, the possibility of accessing the general Chinese population for their views on Tibet tourism and the train journey could be explored in order to be compared with those who committed their time and money to travel to Tibet and were surveyed in this study. This could provide broader implications for Tibet tourism marketing.

Fourth, focused on the train journey, this study just scratched the surface of tourism at the destination. Therefore, more detailed on-site study of Tibet as a tourism destination could be conducted in order to better understand issues concerning the destination management and operation in Tibet and provide more information to guide future tourism development.

Moreover, comparisons of the Qinghai-Tibet railway with other great train journeys, such as the Canadian Rocky Mountaineer and the Trans-Siberia as mentioned in Chapter two, could be conducted to understand the similarities and differences between them. Lessons learned from other great train journeys in the international market could also provide guidance and experience for the further development and management of the Qinghai-Tibet railway in the long run.

In conclusion, tourism in Tibet has increased with the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway and will likely continue to increase. Therefore, it is necessary to study the impacts of tourism on Tibet from economic, social, cultural and natural perspectives. The positive impacts could be encouraged and negative impacts could be managed. By so doing, the preservation of the natural environment, local culture, tradition and religion could be achieved, and impacts to different stakeholders could be balanced.

This study is novel as the first one to look at the newly-opened train journey to Tibet by examining train travelers' perceptions on both the train journey and Tibet. Although it is widely recognized that both the journey and the destination are important components in tourism, very few studies have explored the relative importance of the journey in comparison with the destination. Therefore, this study provides a new perspective on the relationship between tourism and transport, which generates practical implications for tourism development in Tibet, involving both the destination and transportation.

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## Appendix I: Cover letter



Dear Sir or Madam,

I would like to seek your help filling up the questionnaire concerning your travel experience.

This questionnaire is designed for my master thesis research, named *Impacts of Qinghai-Tibet Railway on Tourist Travel Decision and Experience of Tibet*. This study intends to identify and evaluate the impacts of the increased accessibility achieved by the Qinghai-Tibet railway on tourist travel decision and experience of Tibet. The relative importance of the train journey itself to the destination experience in Tibet will also be discussed. The findings could be used to improve the understanding of both the supply and demand sides of the tourism industries in Tibet and provide practical implications for future tourism planning, marketing and management. It would also help enhance tourist travel experience in Tibet in the long run.

The project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics. In the event you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Susan Sykes at 519-888-4567, Ext. 6005.

Your participation is highly appreciated!

Best Regards,  
Ming Ming Su  
Master Student  
Tourism Policy and Planning  
Faculty of Environmental Studies  
University of Waterloo  
Ontario



## Appendix II: Feedback Letter



Dear Sir or Madam,

Here I would like to express my sincere gratitude for your time and efforts in participating in the questionnaire survey.

This questionnaire is designed for my master thesis research, named *Impacts of Qinghai-Tibet Railway on Tourist Travel Decision and Experience of Tibet*. This study intends to identify and evaluate the impacts of the increased accessibility achieved by the Qinghai-Tibet railway on tourist travel decision and experience of Tibet. The relative importance of the train journey itself to the destination experience in Tibet will also be discussed. The findings could be used to improve the understanding of both the supply and demand sides of the tourism industries in Tibet and provide practical implications for future tourism planning, marketing and management. It would also help enhance tourist travel experience in Tibet in the long run.

The project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics. In the event you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Susan Sykes at 519-888-4567, Ext. 6005.

In addition, a summary of the findings will be available by the end of 2007. If you wish to receive a copy of the findings, please leave your contact information below and I will forward a copy to you when it is available.

Many thanks for your participation!

Best Regards,  
Ming Ming Su  
Master Student  
Tourism Policy and Planning  
Faculty of Environmental Studies  
University of Waterloo  
Ontario, Canada

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Contact Information of participant (if a copy of the findings is required):

## Appendix III: Questionnaire Survey (to Tibet)

### **Trip Information:**

- 1, Is it your first visit to Tibet? ☐ Yes ☐ No  
If no, then how many times (including this one) \_\_\_\_\_ and by ☐ Air ☐ Train ☐ Bus
- 2, Purpose of the Trip: ☐ Business ☐ Personal ☐ Visiting Friends/Relatives  
If personal, then: ☐ Travel arranged by yourself ☐ Join package tour
- 3, Proposed length of stay in Tibet (excluding travel): \_\_\_\_\_ nights
- 4, How are you going back? ☐ by Train ☐ by Air ☐ by Bus ☐ Others \_\_\_\_\_  
and why \_\_\_\_\_
- 5, Where did you go on your last trip? \_\_\_\_\_  
How did you get there? by ☐ Air ☐ Train ☐ Bus ☐ Others \_\_\_\_\_  
How long ago? \_\_\_\_\_

### **Travel Experience:**

- 1, In your opinion, how important are the following reasons for your travel to Tibet:

	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Tibetan culture	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Natural scenery	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Opening of the railway line	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Novelty of Tibet	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Mysteriousness of Tibet	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Away from daily routine	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Learning experience	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Personal satisfaction/self-esteem	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Others _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

- 2, What do you think are the barriers of traveling to Tibet:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Distance	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Time	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Harsh natural environment	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Accessibility / Transportation	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Traveling cost	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Health concern	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Others _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

- 3, What are your expectations of Tibet as a tourism destination:

	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High
Nature	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Culture	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Accommodation	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Food	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Activities	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Expenses	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Others _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

4, In your opinion, how important are the following reasons for your travel to Tibet by TRAIN:

	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Novelty	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
View along the train journey	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Lower Price	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Higher Safety	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Relaxation	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Others _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

5, What do you think of the TRAIN journey experience:

	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
Duration	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Schedule	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Service	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Facilities	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
View	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Cost	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

6, How do you agree with the following statements about the importance of the TRAIN journey:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The train journey is comfortable.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I do not feel bored during the train journey	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I am satisfied with the train journey in general.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I prefer train over air as the mode of transportation to Tibet.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I prefer train over bus as the mode of transportation to Tibet.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The train journey is an important part of my travel experience to Tibet.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
If there were no train, I would not visit Tibet.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

7, Your expected total trip expenses per person: ☐ less than 3,500 ☐ 3,500 - 4,999 ☐ 5,000- 6,500 ☐ over 6,500

8, Please advise where did you obtain the information for traveling to Tibet (please check all applicable):

☐ Friends or relatives      ☐ Newspapers or magazines      ☐ TV  
☐ Travel agency      ☐ Others, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**Demographic Information:**

1, Age: ☐ 18- 24 ☐ 25- 34 ☐ 35- 44 ☐ 45- 54 ☐ 55- 64 ☐ 65 and above

2, Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

3, Your Place of Origin (Nation / Province): \_\_\_\_\_

4, Monthly Income (CNY): ☐ less than 1,500 ☐ 1,500 - 2,999 ☐ 3,000- 4,499  
☐ 4,500 - 6,000 ☐ higher than 6,000

5, Education: ☐ up to Primary level ☐ up to Junior High School ☐ up to Senior High School  
☐ up to University/College ☐ Master Degree or above

6, Occupation: ☐ Student ☐ Teacher ☐ Company employee ☐ Government employee  
☐ Retired ☐ Others, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you very much for your help!*

## Appendix IV: Questionnaire Survey (back from Tibet)

### **Trip Information:**

- 1, Is it your first visit to Tibet? ☐ Yes ☐ No  
If no, then how many times (including this one) \_\_\_\_\_ and by ☐ Air ☐ Train ☐ Bus
- 2, Purpose of the Trip: ☐ Business ☐ Personal ☐ Visiting Friends/Relatives  
If personal, then: ☐ Travel arranged by yourself ☐ Join package tour
- 3, Length of stay in Tibet (excluding travel): \_\_\_\_\_ nights
- 4, How did you go to Tibet? ☐ by Train ☐ by Air ☐ by Bus ☐ Others \_\_\_\_\_  
and why \_\_\_\_\_
- 5, Where did you go on your last trip? \_\_\_\_\_  
How did you get there? by ☐ Air ☐ Train ☐ Bus ☐ Others \_\_\_\_\_  
How long ago? \_\_\_\_\_
- 6, Will you visit Tibet again? ☐ Yes ☐ No

### **Travel Experience:**

- 1, your opinion, how important are the following reasons for your travel to Tibet:

	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Tibetan culture	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Natural scenery	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Opening of the railway line	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Novelty of Tibet	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Mysteriousness of Tibet	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Away from daily routine	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Learning experience	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Personal satisfaction/self-esteem	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Others _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

- 2, What do you think are the barriers of traveling to Tibet:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Distance	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Time	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Harsh natural environment	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Accessibility / Transportation	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Traveling cost	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Health concern	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Others _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

- 3, What are your satisfactions of Tibet as a tourism destination:

	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
Nature	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Culture	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Accommodation	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Food	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Activities	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Expenses	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Others _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

4, In your opinion, how important are the following reasons for your travel to Tibet by TRAIN:

	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Novelty	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
View along the train journey	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Lower Price	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Higher Safety	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Relaxation	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Others _____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

5, What do you think of the TRAIN journey experience:

	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
Duration	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Schedule	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Service	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Facilities	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
View	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Cost	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

6, How do you agree with the following statements about the importance of the TRAIN journey:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The train journey is comfortable.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I do not feel bored during the train journey.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I am satisfied with the train journey in general.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I prefer train over air as the mode of transportation to Tibet.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
I prefer train over bus as the mode of transportation to Tibet.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The train journey is an important part of my travel experience to Tibet.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
The train journey experience is equally important as the destination experience in Tibet.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
If there were no train, I would not visit Tibet.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

7, Your total trip expenses per person: ☐ less than 3,500 ☐ 3,500 - 4,999 ☐ 5,000- 6,500 ☐ over 6,500

8, Which one is the best part of your trip? ☐ Train journey ☐ Staying in Tibet

9, Please advise where did you obtain the information for traveling to Tibet (please check all applicable):

☐ Friends or relatives ☐ Newspapers or magazines ☐ TV  
☐ Travel agency ☐ Others, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

### **Demographic Information:**

1, Age: ☐ 18- 24 ☐ 25- 34 ☐ 35- 44 ☐ 45- 54 ☐ 55- 64 ☐ 65 and above

2, Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female

3, Your Place of Origin (Nation / Province): \_\_\_\_\_

4, Monthly Income (CNY): ☐ less than 1,500 ☐ 1,500 - 2,999 ☐ 3,000- 4,499  
☐ 4,500 - 6,000 ☐ higher than 6,000

5, Education: ☐ up to Primary level ☐ up to Junior High School ☐ up to Senior High School  
☐ up to University/College ☐ Master Degree or above

6, Occupation: ☐ Student ☐ Teacher ☐ Company employee ☐ Government employee  
☐ Retired ☐ Others, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**Recommendations:** Please give some recommendations on the improvements of:

1, The train journey to Tibet: \_\_\_\_\_

2, Tourism development of Tibet: \_\_\_\_\_

3, Tibet tourism products: \_\_\_\_\_

4, Anything else you would like to say about your trip?

\_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you very much for your help!*